

Reclaiming Childhood.

Disrupting discourses of identity, autonomy and dis/ability, adopting Arts-based methods, Gramsci and Bourdieu.

A cross-cultural study in Central Italy and North West England.

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Abstract

In this thesis a methodology built on autonomy is outlined, developed and defended to explore children's identities (in two geographical contexts, Central Italy and North West England). The origin of the study stems from the analysis of structures opposing children's expressive liberties in educational and societal practices.

The study considers how these practices advance and permeate research, perpetuating structured discourses that neglect children's priorities, nuanced experiences and expertise. An aesthetic approach, inspired by arts-based research and critical pedagogy, informs the ethical imperatives that expose the underachievement of directive methods, while rediscovering and re-imaging children's authentic participation and self-presentation. The original contribution to knowledge is both methodological and civic. By civic it is understood that the recognition of children's cultural and creative capital can provide an entry point for engagement that is meaningful and evocative, prompting questions that align more justly with children's views.

Contesting the naturalised prescriptions of labels (of autism and dis/ability), guided by Gramsci and Bourdieu, the evidence within this study troubles existing attitudes and methods in research with children, encouraging participation that is creative, innovative, self-directed and generative.

Keywords

Aesthetics, Arts-based methods, autism, autonomy, Bourdieu, critical pedagogy, dis/ability, discourse, England, Gramsci, Italy.

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Abbreviations

ABA Applied behaviour analysis

ABR Arts-based research

ADHD Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

ASD Autism spectrum disorder

CE Creative encounters

F Francesca, researcher

NW North West (England)

‘PE’ Photo elicitation

SENCo Special Educational Needs Coordinator

TA Teaching assistant(s)

Chapter 1

Researching with Children: Disrupting canons of representation

1.1 Introduction and the *status* of representation

This thesis explores children's identities drawing on social theory (Gramsci, 1947; Bourdieu, 1991), to uncover the structures that inhabit children's representation, experiences and agency in different fields. This research ascribes to children the right to experience autonomous self-presentation, and challenges the tendency to uncover meaning from data produced using directive methodological approaches. The aim is to contribute to knowledge construction disrupting methodological presuppositions and dominant ideology that 'contain' research encounters within procedural and disciplinary frameworks, representative of the divisive, or in some instances homogenizing, view of children on the margins. This thesis is the outcome of a reflexive civic process informed by research on children's rights (Alderson, 2012; Christensen and James, 2017; Corsaro, 2018), critical pedagogy (Montessori, 1989; Freire, 2018) and arts-based methods (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). It offers a critical interdisciplinary approach to the study of childhood and dis/ability. For this purpose - throughout the thesis - I use "dis/ability" to represent the ways ability and disability "feed into one another", as argued by Goodley (2014: ix). Imagining a different stance towards researching with children, this thesis advances an original and subversive methodology using arts-based methods to articulate

autonomy, agency and capability. In doing this, I interrogate the quality of children's participation in research and aim to re-centre children's agency, respecting children, their expertise and sociological capabilities. This research aims to disrupt the power distinctions that can characterise research with children and potentially limit 'what' is said, and how it is said, and heard (Roberts, 2017), troubling the redundant colonial gaze on childhood and dis/ability and reflecting critically on the potential of dialogue and context in research. Children's expertise and researcher privilege can this way be re-imaged to forge a productive alliance.

Furthermore, it is inevitable to see that textual and visual representations of children and dis/ability in research continue to advance the use(fulness) of directive forms of enquiry, with limited possibilities for diversification and alternative modes of knowledge production that a meeting of cultures across disciplines can support. I explore these possibilities in this thesis by acknowledging and contesting the political premises inherent in any research process, from recruitment to dissemination, which may intensify in research with children and the study of dis/ability.

Reviewing my role and affiliation with the arts contributed to the development of the methods and a shared expressive language to raise civic consciousness and build a coalition with participants (Leavy, 2015) where the aesthetic dimension of the research process can be recognised as a form of social practice (Thomson, 2008). The fieldwork was conducted in Italy and England with 16 children (assigned a label of autism), their parents and school staff. The choice of research sites is an important aspect of the discussion, to reflect on potential local and cross-cultural qualities in children's identities and subjectivities, and in the establishment of "membership

status” in the field, negotiating my role of insider and outsider (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009: 57).

This thesis is an attempt to offer a research space that recognises children’s ‘first hand’ authorship through creative autonomy, to contribute to the conversation on issues of representation and identity, in an effort to strengthen participatory rights as well as quality in the forms that participation takes. In this chapter I introduce my reflections on the *status* of children’s participation and representation in and through research and the sociological and methodological values on which the thesis is premised.

1.2 Outlining the thesis

The thesis offers a multimodal, aesthetic and textual collection of experiences and interpretations that arise in dialogue with participants. The study engages with diverse modes of representation that foster children’s autonomy in research, while troubling the divisions crystallised by canonical expectations that determine *who* participates and *how*, and *whose* subjectivities are deemed to be legitimate or valid in academic debate. Securing a space for needed methodological flexibility can contribute to changing the rhetoric that is the enactment of political and social structures. These structures represent more than epistemological tensions in the academe, they are the linguistic and procedural reiteration of divisive assumptions that become normalised. The study explores how concepts of childhood and identity in research continue to be shaped - despite apparent progress - by discourses of ableism, concerted marginalisation and disadvantage (Fielding, 2007; Alderson,

2012; Tisdall, 2012; Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2014; Beaudry, 2016; Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor, 2018).

The study interrogates the persistently contentious ‘cultures’ of participation and marginalisation that can be produced and reproduced in different sites, including research and education. The thesis thus raises several questions on the identity, representation and agency of labelled children and the practices and outcomes that channel their visibility. The discussion challenges the linguistic frames that situate childhoods on distinct planes that serve to normalise ‘othering’ (Milton, 2018; Sayers, 2018; Slater and Chapman, 2018) through ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971, Coben, 2002; Crehan, 2016; Donoghue, 2018). This thesis seeks to make a contribution to current literature by offering alternative narratives while recognising the political tensions and structured divisions that determine the recognition and authority of children’s views. By foregrounding aesthetic and textual narratives, this research proposes two main aims:

The first is to unpack and rework the ethical and methodological habits that persist when conducting research with children by contesting directive gazes and planning an original experiential methodology with children that assumes their capability, to re-centre autonomous agency often stifled by rhetoric.

The second is to examine common sense practices and discourses that determine structured social distinctions contributing to inequalities and differences in childhood(s) and children’s opportunities.

The thesis is situated at the intersection of methodological assumptions and canons exposing structured inequality in fields in which children appear to have differential access to personal agency and representation. It focuses on the experiences brought

to life by children who have participated in this research as experts, artists, and importantly as capable agents in the positions occupied in the course of this study in their geo-cultural contexts, giving material form to their stories, their perceptions and understandings. A thematic analysis illustrates commonalities in children's views of participation in different fields and roles, highlighting shared experiences and interpretations, similar struggles and aspirations in the construction and life of their identities and personhood. While the emphasis *in situ* was on cultural responsiveness and flexibility, the stories emerging from the field reveal that situated discourses stem from deep-rooted structured conditionings that live under the surface of geographic 'situality' (Ross, 1989).

Researchers in the social sciences have long advocated for transparency and respect in the rendition of the experiences of individuals and communities (Biggs and Büchler, 2011; Horgan et al., 2017; Piazza and Taylor, 2017). There is a strong trend in designing research that is together engaging and emancipatory, but it is still possible to delve further into the ways in which research is conducted and with whom, and for what purposes and audiences. This study contributes to a civic and methodological debate that aims to dismantle presuppositions that foreclose children's ability to interpret and convey their experiences, when situated on the margins of dominant mainstream discourse (Sarojini Hart, 2014; Ryan, 2018). The study illuminates children's perceptions of their identities and the intersecting threads of the social fabric in which these evolve. Reframing representation to encompass diverse viewpoints and interrogating the impact of directive practices can contribute to a critical appraisal of autonomy and agency, engaging children's social

competencies through tactile and aesthetic participation (Bourdieu, 1996; Alderson, 2012; Wood, 2014; Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018).

1.3 Questions of recruitment and participation

Attitudes towards children and young people in research are complex. It is fair to say that children and young people have become an important presence in research and their role is increasingly active (Wickenden, 2011; Baraldi and Iervese, 2014; Sarojini Hart, 2014; Corsaro, 2018). Traditional adult-centric views and cognitive orthodoxies, however, are still prevalent in research-born discourse (Thomas, 2007; Nolas, 2011; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Alderson, 2017). Some research perspectives and methods continue to evidence normative expectations, which affect both recruitment and dissemination; with questions and outcomes situated in places that are distant from the horizons of those we seek to engage and empower. I argue that such expectations are the fruit of a limited political vision of (educational) research. For children and young people on the margins, for whom the unequal distribution of material and cultural capital remains unquestioned, directive methods may appear to be a less-than-relevant vehicle for knowledge exchange, agentic participation and identity re-negotiation (Montessori, 1970; Gee, 2000; Watson, 2008; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Leavy, 2015; Nind and Vinha, 2016). There is also a possibility that those who lack the opportunity to participate in their social spheres are conditioned to believe that they have little to ‘say’ or contribute in the process of knowledge production. At the same time, these conditionings can permeate the views of researchers and stakeholders, and the workings of a perpetual and elitist disposition towards participation in socio-political enterprises of which

research is a part. Moreover, families and children involved in research about their experience of dis/ability, for example, are often recruited thanks to adults' existing affiliation with charities and support groups that in some ways steer the debate *a priori*. Researchers have to accept some responsibility for being attracted to these established pathways to recruitment, engagement and dissemination. In line with these premises, as researchers occupying a position of agentic privilege, we should collectively strive to foster diversity and equity in the forms of engagement we use to recruit and engage participants, to document and address children's experiences in particular, but also to foreground the capability of participants who candidly and generously advance their views.

This study engages individuals and groups not previously included in an exploration of their experiences, in research (and often other *fora*); initiating an ethical dialogue that is reflexive and helps to reimagine children's participation when civic membership is activated in children's own terms. This stance calls for an attentive awareness of the distinctions between childhoods, and between adults and children, and their impact on recruitment, participation and agency in and through research. These distinctions reproduce deeper sociological inequalities. In other terms, children's views and liberties in research can replicate similar advantages apparent in educational and societal discourse (Goodley et al., 2016). This study is undertaken from a position that aims to engage children with respect and attentive relationality.

I have focussed on examining children's perspectives from their powerful aesthetic representations, minimising the agentic distinctions that have delegated childhoods to categories determined by ableist narratives (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Milton, 2018). I argue that it is necessary to adopt a committed and

‘modest’ perspective at the point of negotiating entry into the research dialogue, recognising children’s capabilities, and their ability to contribute to research that is culturally relevant, relational, open yet secure and sustainable.

1.4 Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into four parts. In each of these, the leading thread challenges the assumptions that continue to shape children’s agency and too often underemphasise the methodological and political terrain that holds the structures and practices that reproduce distinctions between children and childhoods. The chapters in **Part I Researching with Children. Ethics, Autonomy and Social Theory** examine the literature that informs my discussion on the ethical value of autonomy in research with children, and the adaptation of arts-based principles and dialogic interactions. The intent is to recalibrate the power divisions apparent in research recruitment, participation and dissemination. In **Chapter 2, *Autonomy and the Scholarship of Arts-based research***, I situate this enquiry in the context of arts-based research. While arts-based research is often associated with currents of practitioner-led expertise in a craft, form of abstraction and creative ability, I present the case for ‘devoting’ this expertise to re-frame the terms through which aesthetic agency is articulated by children, serving as an exciting and unconventional vehicle for both participation and interpretation. The use of art materials and non-directive forms of engagement provides multiple counter-narratives, challenging the uncritical focus on documenting experience through an instructional lens as the key methodological objective.

Investing in the ‘teachings’ of arts-based research, I argue, can provide the needed methodological anarchy that can effectively disrupt the dependence on directive methods of engagement that are favoured in research with children (with dis/abilities). It is essential that an openness to unforeseen possibilities is inherent in children’s access to resources, temporal and material, if researchers and children are to engage more attentively with lived experience and authenticity. **Chapter 3** *Distinction and participation, and the politics of representation in research with children* confronts recruitment habits and outlines a challenge to the persistent divisive practices in research with children. The chapter highlights the limits of measuring the impact of participation when the views of children, who are disenfranchised in their familiar spheres, continue to be relegated or posited in overly specialised *fora*. This habit diminishes the potential of equal representation in the broad societal debate. This way common sense, mainstream and ableist discourse can remain unquestioned, reducing the advancement of nuanced perspectives and a critical turn in recruitment and dialogue, in and through research, forestalling participation and continuing to exclude and misrepresent a range of insights and views.

Taking research discourse beyond the dominant narrative is a necessary civic commitment; it can lead to a more adequate representation of diverse viewpoints, to challenge marginalisation and broaden membership in the processes and outcomes of participation. It is a call for different audiences to disrupt historical habits and readdress the divisions that persist in reductionist thought that can pervade research with dis/abled children. In **Part II Methods and Relationality**, I describe the methodology and the intersection of methods and themes emerging from co-

constructing a dialogic and relational research environment. **Chapter 4** *Methodology: enacting research through interdisciplinarity, relationality and a critical analysis of themes and discourse* discusses the methodological and epistemological approach taken in the study and the ethical considerations examined in developing the methods. I introduce my decision to draw upon a Bourdieusian and Gramscian sociological standpoint, arguing that this position invites a critical exploration of children's material representations and interpretations of their lived realities, accounting for both structure and agency. The methodology centres children's capability to counter the deeply divisive practices that characterise participation in different fields. The methods include multimodal activities such as *creative encounters*, inspired by arts-based research and developed with children-participants, unstructured interviews with children's mothers and fathers and photo-elicitation focus groups with school staff. I discuss my conscious engagement with the historical and contextual premises in which the research activities are enmeshed, and the rationale of using thematic analysis informed and underpinned by principles of critical discourse analysis in the study of multiple subjectivities and social structures. **Chapter 5** *Creative encounters* proposes an alternative understanding of artistic processes as research. Conventionally used by artist-researchers, these processes might be considered problematic, 'messy', or even incompatible, in research with children (Stirling, 2015; Brown, 2019). The advantages of these practices can outweigh the potential scepticism towards the worth of liberal and creative self-expression in research with children, and researchers' anxiety towards children's autonomy and spontaneity in their engagement in research. This is a valuable outlook at a time when children's participation continues to be questioned,

dissected and, yet, frequently undermined. Through a blending of critical pedagogy and arts practice and an open disposition towards children's views of my role, it was possible to foster trust and build a shared habitat to adjust and minimise the power divisions warranted in other spaces. In these conditions, it was also possible to explore children's experiences while reflecting on the potential of arts-based methods to deliver an ethical approach to participation, constructed around the material and abstract possibilities of embodied creative processes, which are autonomous and intentional in nature. In **Part III Analysis, Perceptions and Structures**, the chapters and the subsections within these are organised with a progressive approach to the themes from children's and adults' perceptions through to institution-wide, cultural and social, practices and discourses. These illustrate common and diverse experiences, which emerge across geographic sites, and are analysed according to thematic affinity. I explore the persistent practices of marginalisation and othering that are together internalised and rooted in children's interpretations, which materialise in aesthetic form. Identity in the creative process is the habitus from which children select, explore, share experiences and reconfigure entirety and partiality. The analysis includes photographs and commentaries that encompass the material and embodied views of 16 children and their parents and school practitioners. The visual and textual representations become forms of participation and interpretation in the analysis. The metaphors that are 'borrowed' enable a fresh awareness of children's ability to observe, question and review their experiences. These reveal the language and the discursive activity of the internalised worlds behind children's illustrations of their realities. Discourses from children and adult-participants highlight a tendency to formulate desirable identities, to question the role

of normative developmental milestones (Burman, 2016) and expectations of ‘normalcy’ (Davis, 2010; Cagliari et al., 2011; Slater and Chapman, 2018).

In **Chapter 6, “Look at me, I’m an artist” Identity, creativity and agency. Exploring the self and other** the analysis focuses on children’s aesthetic narratives, their agency and creative authority. A range of examples of children’s views in the artefacts and photographs from the creative encounters ‘channels’ the analysis. The discussion presents a visual repertoire of children’s participation and art, and field notes taken during the encounters. I examine disadvantage and marginalisation and the mechanisms that affect the development of personal identities and determine variability in the recognition of capability in different fields. The aesthetic outputs are analysed as multimodal text, it is also important to note that I avoid paraphrasing the experiences activated in artistic form to invite different agents in and beyond the research activity to put forward diverse and subjective interpretations contributing to an evolving debate. Elements of Chapters 5 and 6 form part of a publication in a special issue of the International Journal of Social Research Methodology, focusing on using creative and visual methods in comparative research with children. **Chapter 7 Agentic status and dis/courses of human potential** includes the analysis of the views and experiences of parents and school practitioners, drawn from the interviews with parents and the testimonies from the photo elicitation focus groups in schools. Examining children’s identities and agency from different angles helped to contextualise children’s aspirations and struggles. The analysis suggests that parents and educators can face similar challenges in asserting their own sense of agency in the context of structured interactions, while also illustrating important points of connection between roles and across geo-cultural sites.

Part IV Thesis conclusion, Chapter 8: *Knowledge mobilisation and Aesthetics* is

an invitation to disrupt the canons of qualitative research with children. The chapter re-engages with the sociological value of children's insights through a radical reading of their views, revealing deeply problematic and persistent political ambitions. Recognising meaning from autonomous and aesthetic work is testimony to children's ability to articulate complex ideas based on their own interpretations of structured conditionings, eliciting an evolving and progressive discovery of intersectionality in the subtle and explicit forms of distinction apparent in different fields, visible and internalised. The chapter draws upon the potential of fostering an egalitarian dialogue in research, which evolved and continues beyond the life span of the fieldwork activities. The collaborative and dialogic nature of the interactions was an invaluable means of entering the field and maintaining a sustainable and enriching process of discovery, representation and agency.

I reflect on a creative and aesthetic turn in knowledge production and agentic membership in research, and the implications of these principles on education and social participation, for children, their families and educators. I conclude with further questions on the political and civic role of the research in contesting the persistent subordination of childhood and difference.

Defining reoccurring terms

This research process endorses participatory rights and choices articulated by interrupting and problematizing reoccurring definitions that are misleading and assumptions that 'live' around dis/ability and ableist discourse. Therefore, to address

the ambiguity of models and labels, it is important to identify the ways in which I use the terms (1) agency, (2) ability and (3) autism throughout the thesis.

(1) Agency

The notion of agency in research and sociological discourse is frequently employed to represent and define the right to access and express one's own views and experiences, opinions, desires and struggles. Such a right can be explored and realised within an enabling environment where social actors are attentive to its diverse manifestations (Moran-Ellis, 2013; Belluigi, 2018). Montessori (1989) focuses on observing and respecting meaning produced by individuals adapting their capabilities to transpose their own versions of ability and agency, in environments that encourage autonomy. Often the validity of meaning is pre-empted by rhetoric, thus stalling agency. Agency is relational, contextual and variable, dependent on expectations and conformity that assign validity according to specific communication orthodoxies and their effectiveness. To interrupt this habit, throughout this thesis, I will use the term to indicate not only the ways participants explore opportunities to be 'seen and heard' (Lomax, 2015; Roberts, 2017) but also to identify ways that other social actors and environments can favour its expression and visibility as a vessel for self-expression and identity.

(2) Ability

Ability can have a variety of connotations, and is often used as a signifier to qualify children's progress according to normative assumptions and commonsensical developmental milestones. I argue that a fixed use of the term ability can interfere with what we are willing to see versus what the canon requires us to find. Contesting

the notion of ability as an abstraction of the canon to which children's expressions and roles should conform, I use the term to indicate children's capability to interact with their material, cultural and relational realities in ways that are relevant, multiple and subjective. This definition entails respecting choice, autonomy and diversity at every stage of the process of self-representation and self-realisation, as well as the 'ability' of any observer (including the researcher) to receive and understand the way 'ability' is produced by discursive practices, norms and assumptions in different contexts. The ambition here is to interrupt generality, contrasting models of violence and regulation that undermine capability; thus favouring a non-hierarchical connotation of ability, one that defends the freedom to represent oneself and concretises agency.

The thesis extends its focus "beyond that typically addressed by current cognitive or social schools of anthropology to include the observation and analysis of biophysical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human activity" (Lundy Dobbert and Kurth-Schai, 1992: 94).

(3) Autism

The thesis deals *in primis* with human experience, avoiding definitions of dis/ability and autism that often entangle identities with collective and dehumanising discourse. With a focus on analysing research-born discourse and school rhetoric, throughout the thesis, I resist the tendency to label difference in ways that essentialise and minimise individuality even within conventions that privilege the apparently malleable social model of dis/ability. In dealing with both the permanence of labels and the heterogeneity of their meaning, I trouble the persistence of social disadvantage in ways that are not dissimilar to social class distinctions and inequities. The term or label of autism is treated as it emerges from the experiences of

participants and the analysis of its representation in discourse is affiliated with meanings that are both familiar and assigned to their *status*. The moral failure of labels and the economic mechanisms of education bias will be treated in depth in Chapter 8 (thesis conclusion).

The research exchanges, therefore, become a way of disrupting the ‘big issue’ of autism, highlighting the more tangible and concrete disparities that are the focus of participants’ subjectivities, which lay beneath the surface of a label. The analysis of themes relating to such discourses elicit an examination of variability of treatment, damage and advantage that stems from systematic bias around difference. Changing the assumptions of labels, as well as challenging these in the research process, helps to identify one’s own underlining values and discomfort (Rix and Sheehy, 2010), thus the transformative impulse of research participation can be critical in revising subjective and collective approaches to diversity. I also recognise the subjectivity of alternative ‘linguistic’ descriptions, preferring to engage human nature in a research endeavour that seeks to balance freedom with autonomy and (self)authorship.

These premises do not equate to a synthetic understanding of autism, rather, these are a point of reference to situate my own biography in the interactions with “local research partners” (Thomson et al., 2013), thus, creating an environment in which unique and localised stories are validated “as much as possible in their own terms” (McDermott and Varenne, 2006: 7).

Throughout the thesis, ability and capability are treated interchangeably to problematize and activate participation, and to counter the artifice of the historical and political assumptions behind the streaming and sifting of children and childhoods. To study how children identify themselves and how this happens in

relation to others, and consistent with my values, I argue that this is possible through autonomy, for children to explore their identities in a conscious, informed and ethical way.

1.5 Academic contribution of the thesis

This research reflects the intention to reaffirm both methodological responsibility and alternative representations of meaning and identity. The methodology is subversive. The point is to uncover children's experiences, which in their evolving (aesthetic) form cannot be anticipated, to explore issues of agency and identity without reservation, to counteract predispositions that dehumanise children's presence and authority (overtly or inherently) in research and beyond.

Using different perspectives to illustrate children's roles and views, presentation and representation are privileged over 'voice', thus adding texture to children's identity in the immediacy of the research activities through to their social status. The carefully observed creative moments allow analytical richness without being descriptive. The aesthetic form of children's stories deals with the quotidian, with childhood and with the explicit tensions between self and other, which cannot be considered in isolation. The backdrop is the persistent discourse of normalcy to which children's experiences can be anchored (Cagliari et al., 2011; Slater and Chapman, 2018). The virtues associated with normalcy through common sense and ableist rhetoric emerge in different guises.

The role of this research is to re-centre children's agency and identity; the aspiration is for aesthetic meaning-making to be a vehicle for a more complex interpretation of

children's realities, involving diverse audiences and stakeholders, to interrogate the *status quo* without stifling the debate with redundant conditionings.

It is worth noting that the fervent evolution of national and international statements in support of a radical commitment to children's rights is not always translated into the shaping of research with children situated at the margins. Contemporary scholars across the social sciences are committed to engaging with the urgent issue of conducting research that engages children's personal priorities and subjectivities (Alderson, 2017; Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018; Corsaro, 2018; Poretti, 2018). While different methodological approaches use valuable forms of engagement, it is apparent that in research, like education, the capability of children to report on their realities is affected by existing tensions emerging from structured discourses that derive from societal and historical presuppositions. While there is an increasing rise of children's first-hand accounts in research (see for example Corsaro, 2018 and Wyness, 2018), the form and the quality of the methods used to 'produce' these accounts can be variable. There is a risk that research conducted with children with a diagnosis, or a label, denoting 'diversion from normalcy', might produce accounts that replicate attitudes entrenched in the instructional interactions which can limit children's access to personal agency and autonomy. Concurrently, disciplinary distinctions can mimic the distances that materialise in social debates and relational attitudes. The literature and methodologies attempting to demystify these artificial distinctions serve to draw our collective civic attention to issues of confusion and misappropriation around both children's ability to participate in research and the need to respect the significance and originality of their contributions.

The choice of countries in which I conducted the study is an outcome of my biographical self. My intention is to bridge the emic perspective of the cultural-insider, shared with Italian participants, with the etic perspective developed in my professional life in the UK (Olive, 2014; Morris et al., 1999). “The intersection of cultural identity and education” (Fox, 2013: 133) is an important component of my role in this study and invites openness about my positioning and its effect on relationality, participants’ meaning-making, and on the analysis. The “relational dimension” of the research (Brann-Barrett, 2014: 76) and the researcher’s positioning become part of the methodology and analysis, and “the ethical nature of the research process itself” (Curtis et al., 2014: 178); and require my role to be dynamic rather than “fully formed” while engaging in a dialogue that is reflexive and respectful (Harvey, 2013: 86). Therefore, the methods adopted have the potential to benefit from (and are not limited by) previous experiences and familiarity with the research sites. This includes an understanding of the educational structures in each country, which appear to present only subtle differences (for example, in the stages that constitute compulsory education). However, a significant distinction appears in the existence of ‘special schools’ in the UK, while in Italy education for pupils with special educational needs has been fully assigned to mainstream institutions. The rejection of special schools and the passing of the legislation on *integrazione* (RI, 1977) should be viewed with caution; particularly with respect to the notion of education provision in mainstream contexts and the variability that can characterise nationwide policies. Indeed, D’Alessio (2011: xiii) warns that “the passing of legislation may not be sufficient to fully guarantee the participation of all pupils” which, it could be argued, is a valid concern for Italy as well as the UK.

Notes on recruitment

Support roles are assigned to qualified teachers in Italy and largely to teaching assistants (TAs) in England. While support teachers in Italy embody the role that TAs have in English classrooms, it is useful to explain that in Italy teachers are sourced from a national ‘merit list’ (see, Drago et al., 2003). According to their position on the list, qualified teachers are employed to work in schools that may be distant from their home/geographical location and in roles that may not reflect their subject specialism or training. Thus, teachers occupying support positions may have limited experience of working in special education roles and perceive such roles as subordinate to the status of class/subject teachers. Additionally, changing demands in particular regions, and teachers’ requests to relocate, diminish the longevity of the support role often associated with a short-term contract. The intentions advanced in the national policy of *integrazione* (RI, 1977), to include all children by placing them in mainstream schools, are therefore challenged by an employment model that destabilises professional identity and sustainable teaching and learning. In the UK, there appears to be a significant shift towards developing person-centred approaches (DfE and DH, 2015); while concurrently taking into account rapidly changing school demographics (Smith et al., 2014). Educational practices, in the UK, give particular attention to the interdisciplinary agencies involved in supporting learning success by raising awareness of supplementary services available to children and their families (Obiakor and Bakken, 2015). I will return to these significant, delicate, and affective features of policy, language, and marginalisation, in the analysis. It is important to emphasise that conducting the research in two distinct settings has the potential to

increase heterogeneity while conveying local specificity sensitively (Sibley, 1995; Burke, 2008; Thomson, 2008; Lomax, 2012).

1.6 Contextualising the Research

Settling on the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study served to review the criticality of a framework that would enable a flexible dialogic research relationship with participants that had to be culturally situated and relevant. The role of the ethnographer which I had initially considered, had to be significantly adapted to establish a participatory model that would encourage membership and leadership for children first, and at different stages for their parents and school staff. The research had to engage with the ethical issues of entering, respecting and engaging with children's local cultures, in familial and educational spaces (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). The points of entry, due to ethical protocols and local demands, were established with school leaders (*dirigenti*, in Italy) and head teachers (in the UK) first; the gatekeepers, who facilitated my initial contact with teachers, then parents and (subsequently) with children. This research project and the methods used in the field - with children, parents and school practitioners, from recruitment to participation, and analysis - have been approved by Edge Hill University's Research Ethics Committee. It is important to note, that contrary to the logistical stages of protocol, recruitment was secured only at the point of receiving children's assent and their acceptance of me in their world. Their approval established the commencement of the activities. This also involved a gradual reframing of my role as an "atypical, less powerful adult" (*ibid*, 2017: 12).

1.7 Researcher Identity and Positionality

In this study, like any activity involving personal, professional and ethical values, my biographical self is juxtaposed with professional and pedagogic experiences. This position invigorated the social and moral driving force behind this cross-cultural project, rendering my role culturally and linguistically malleable and less threatening. Indeed, my own participant status was approached with curiosity by those inhabiting the realities I aimed to explore (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017).

I am Italian; I was born and raised in Sardinia, where I attended school until I reached eighteen years of age. Just over two decades ago, I moved to the UK, to study at university, trained and qualified to teach and developed a conscious interest in special education and autism specifically. My professional and academic identity would appear to be more active in my roles in the UK, where I have worked as a visual artist and teacher in mainstream and special education, and academia.

Sardinia is my cultural home, Italy my *patria*, and it is my experience (and possibly that of other fellow Italians abroad) that during regular visits to my hometown, one's patriotic and communitarian agency shadows the professional identity associated with life in the UK. During my teaching activity in special education, only a close circle of friends and family members had a comprehensive picture of my role in UK schools. Others (friends and relatives, in Italy), many of whom are professionals in the field of education, had little idea of my professional role in the UK. They sought to illustrate my work by attempting to locate an equivalence in the Italian education system. This often led to discussions, on inclusion and/vs integration, that have also emerged in the field in this study.

It is necessary to recognise that - in practice - any educational role is conditioned by different rhetorical registers that determine the ‘contours’ of one’s outlook on distinctions and participation in education. It would appear that by embodying the present researcher-role there is a greater opportunity to resist and trouble discursive habits and tensions that manifest in education, and to be involved in a critical review of the quality of participation for the children that are persistently situated on the margins.

1.8 Questioning conditioned beliefs to foreground the stories of experts

Labelling difference represents a central methodological discomfort in this study. The approach taken was driven by dialogue and reflexivity, with self-presentation being an important priority in the interactions and engagement of potential participants. All children in the study had a diagnosis of autism. And while they produced aesthetic renditions of experience that evidence systemic inequalities, none of the children involved in the study made direct reference to the diagnosis. I have omitted the use of the label for most part of the thesis (while it emerges prominently in the narratives of school practitioners and parents). The omission has deeper implications. Children in the study occupy a position of agentic authority. They exercise agency and autonomy in ways that differ from their habitus (Bourdieu, 2005a), determining boundaries, activity and relationality, in other spaces. I also wanted to avoid a colonial gaze on the analysis and on the processes in the creative space, as well as in the interviews with parents and practitioners. The scope was to minimise prevailing false dichotomies and disrupt dominant research outcomes that categorise childhoods before engaging with children in the field.

The focus on autism (while it extends my previous work as a researcher and teacher in special education) draws attention to the proliferation of habitual ableist perceptions, maintained through common sense and popularised, functioning as an example of normative divisions that I interrogate and challenge (Hodge, 2016; Slater and Chapman, 2018). On closer inspection, the impact of labels and diagnoses on children, on their chances of equitable education and life experiences, assumes towering form. Labels have political, ideological and economic function (Tregaskis, 2004; Erevelles, 2011; Haraldsdóttir, 2013; Hodge, 2016), producing stereotypes that position the most vulnerable on the edge of dominant groups, affecting participation in research and education and foreclosing access to views and capabilities of those disadvantaged by an ableist discourse. I hope that this thesis will go some way to alter the political trajectory of directive participation and inequality, often endorsed in societal discourse in the guise of ‘common good’ and ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1992).

Part I Researching with Children. Ethics, Autonomy and Social Theory

Chapter 2

Autonomy and the scholarship of Arts-based research

2.1 Introduction to the literature

I am wondering about a research approach that, boldly but not rudely, humbly and not arrogantly, intervenes in the current state of educational affairs, one that expands the reach of our scholarship because of (*and not despite*) the fact that it is profoundly aesthetic, one that *both* finds its inspiration in the arts *and* leads to progressive forms of social awareness.

(Barone, 2008: 34, emphases in original)

Tom Barone's words provide an eloquent rendition of the sociological worth and workings of arts-based research, drawing attention to the social and politically overt action that arts-based investigations can stimulate, by reframing 'common sense' and conventional methodological narratives (Gramsci, 1992). This type of work can "surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of specialised practice" (Schön, 1983: 61). Moreover, by expanding the reach of the arts, through interdisciplinary research, it is possible to commit more dynamically to autonomy and the ethics of relational meaning-making. Arts-based researchers can change "the conversation about what constitutes knowledge creation beyond the use of art as representation in the social sciences" (Sajnani, 2013: 82). Arts-based research can be a source of social redress that is receptive to new questions and transformative knowledge, problematizing participation and validation, offering different "prompts for reflecting on the aesthetics and ethics of practice" (Haseman, 2012: 153). Aesthetic works can evoke

interactions with new audience members, “enabling them to identify with facets of the work” and participate in a reconstruction of meaning (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 69), thus provoking the discovery of untold narratives that derive from material processes of sociological value.

“The term *arts based research* originated at an educational event” in 1993; Eisner had decided to develop the “connection between the arts and education” and an understanding of what research into social phenomena “guided by aesthetic features might look like” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: ix).

From its inception, arts-based research has offered alternative ways to explore and access important social issues that merge interpretation with discovery, facilitating ‘resonances’ between subjective perceptions of experience and visual modalities (Leavy, 2015); while broadening the reach of participatory practices and stakeholders, including participants, researchers, educators, policy makers and (indeed) artists. This kind of scholarship developed with participants, through processes of collaboration and adaptation of artistic devices, can create a “storying place that links practice with theory”, the social with the visceral (Stewart, 2012: 132).

My commitment to the realisation of these processes aligns with my values in ways that amplify my belief that arts practices and sensitivities can help situate participants and researchers (and audiences) in a shared space for knowledge production. Artistic processes can guide adults’ commitment to children, to explore and elucidate - together - the deeply divisive inequalities in educational phenomena. Arts-based methods can challenge research discourses that privilege literal devices, consumption and audiences, and provide different tools to investigate distinctions and inequalities,

often re-enacted in the landscape of educational research (Kothari, 2001; Carr, 2004; Foster, 2016).

Despite an increasing interest in the views of those “who have been sidelined from social, cultural, economic and political agendas” (Von Benzon and Van Blerk, 2017: 896), researchers (and institutions) continue to be inclined to pursue methodological discourses that evidence patterns of recruitment and engagement that favour particular populations, positionalities and *voices*. The move towards an increasingly inclusive approach to social science, in the effort to reach novel perspectives, continues to propagate a narrative that punctuates the tendency to choose methods and devices that are considered the least methodologically challenging for researching with children with disabilities (Holt, 2010; Tisdall, 2012; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). Arguably, this can expose a dominant methodological habit to anchor participation on particular forms of communication and ability, through which children “take part in activities designed and structured by adults and frequently intended as training” for future participation, in contrast with “making an active contribution in the present” (Mason et al., 2010: 128-129).

Arts-based projects can be critical in alerting researchers to alternative ‘pictures’ and the value of a relational blending of meaning and participation, while making an important contribution to dispelling redundant discourses on children’s capabilities. Arts-based methods can be an enduring catalysts for stimulating opportunities to both engage with and disseminate children’s experiences in ways that are original, respectful and meaningful (Matthews, 2005; James and Prout, 2015; Marsh, 2015; Procter and Hatton, 2015; Rowsell, 2015).

This chapter introduces the value of arts-based research in raising necessary sociological questions on directive discourses and methods used in research with children, by reviewing the ways in which creative epistemologies can be effective in contributing to designing approaches that are enabling, dialogic and “characterised by the promotion of autonomy” (Mathew et al., 2010: 121).

The perspectives addressed in the four sections of the chapter raise these questions and trouble a “semantics of control” that is perpetuated in research and educational discourse (*ibid*). The first section provides an overview of the methodological potential of arts-based research. I draw on interdisciplinarity and the possibilities it offers to engage with person-centred thought for the development of socially just ways of ‘looking’, researching and participating. The second part addresses the value of autonomy and creativity in research and therapy, and the role of critical pedagogy in informing these practices, thus offering alternative narratives to affirm the role of children’s active engagement in research. I proceed by focusing on art as a product of socio-cultural experience and as method. Finally, the chapter invites considerations on the nature of dissemination in research concerning childhood experiences. By unpacking presentation and re-presentation as well as textual orthodoxies, in relation to the multimodality of artistic outputs, I explore the transactional processes between arts practice and agency, aesthetics and politics.

2.2 Reflections on participation. Disrupting the canons of educational research

Arts practices and environments can be designed so that “both children and adults can be treated as respected partners, provided that there is transparency in the objectives and process” (Johnson, 2010: 156). Arts-based research, visual methods, relationality

and play, “can be part of a range of strategies that are useful in helping to explore differences in perspective and in exploring power differentials and dynamics” (*ibid*, 2010: 160; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Wood, 2015; Finlay, 2016). Arts-based research highlights the need for a debate on the perceived challenges of its ‘tools’, to interrogate the use of conventional devices and the need to attract alternative skills that can “shape and influence the public consciousness by critiquing the politically conventional and the socially orthodox” (Barone, 2008: 36). Questioning methodological conventions and rubrics to examine the rhetoric around participation, through a critical arts lens, reframes the importance of engaging in a dialogue with populations identified as being on the margins.

Marginalisation “is socially-constructed and dependent on the way in which power relations are created” (Von Benzon and Van Blerk, 2017: 897) and this condition is true of both research and society. Since marginalisation is “context-dependent” (*ibid*) and socially constructed, it is necessary to create environments in which individuals and identities are treated with dignity and not marginalised in/by the research process. By rejecting this understanding researchers risk forestalling the originality of the contributions to knowledge creation that an egalitarian approach can secure.

Arts-based research can raise important questions to examine equity and equality in representation and the tendency to compartmentalise and present children’s realities in research, in ways that follow societal distinctions and divisions. Creating encounters with participants that are together ethical, experiential and sociologically invigorating can challenge these divisions by re-positioning self-presentation, capability and authenticity. A review of the literature guides the evolution of my research questions, emerging from the need to challenge the limitations and

assumptions based on conformity and difference, and reproduced in tentative research (and educational) discourse (Vincs, 2012). By reflecting on the possibilities of alternative research genres, I explore the synergies between artistic research and children's capabilities, to provide a context of discovery that gives significance to children's access to their creative and tactile literacies, where children's perspectives and agency can influence the modes of relationality and meaning-making. My own position "demands the courage to experiment" (Sajnani, 2013: 80), is "socially engaged", "epistemologically humble" (Barone, 2008: 34) and committed to attending to the originality and validity of children's contributions. This methodological position is evolving and relational and reflects my view that research, like education and other social practices, should be rich in meaningful and direct experiences that arise from observing and manifesting personal agency.

Belluigi (2018) searched for an authentic research design that could satisfy her personal values and pedagogic positionality, making an interesting case for embarking in a less conventional methodological approach to investigate participant-agency beyond the restrictions of academic discourse in which ethical methodologies (or rather those considered to be ethical by scholarly standards) are typically entrenched. My attitude to researcher positionality and privilege, and thus the search for, what Belluigi calls, "methodological irresponsibility" are similar (*ibid*, 2018: 155). In fact, I found myself searching for works by scholars that are prepared to disrupt the tendency to produce 'traditional' outcomes and data contained and - in some way - fitting a predetermined canon. Such tendency is particularly noticeable in research with children and educational research, and limits the involvement of participants that are subjected to marginalisation in their social fields.

There is a pervasive habit to align research findings with measurable outcomes even when the research methodology is purely qualitative, prematurely disengaging affective exploration, purpose and insight. By interrupting the propensity to measure and contain expression and to encourage instead a range of aesthetic possibilities, “art-based and artistic research is an attempt to restore meaning” of personal and plural significance (Siegesmund, 2014: 107). Artistic research can promote greater freedom in approaching and fostering spontaneity in research with children, “to tolerate the uncertainty” and invite improvisation, thus validating exploration, multiplicity and richness of meaning (Sajnani, 2013: 80).

Valuing children’s subjective realities through ‘unpredictable’ outcomes can help to estimate and understand the impact of societal discourses and conditionings. Arts-based research can invite an iterative and responsive exploration of experience (Bresler, 2008), by liberating agency from performativity, thus it is possible to uncover different structures and practices at work. These considerations can also contribute to addressing the power imbalance between researchers and participants (both children and adult participants), as well as encouraging openness to encountering a range of possibilities, to expect the unexpected, and value the unforeseeable outcomes of purposeful research interactions.

Interdisciplinarity, Arts-based research and Visual methods: principles, practices and distinctions

“Arts-based research (ABR)”, its methods and practices, constitute “a significant methodological genre” (Chilton and Leavy, 2014: 403). A growing number of methods using visual materials is increasingly populating contemporary social

science research (Cutcher, 2013; Rose, 2014; Wood, 2015). However, images often make their appearance “more as communicational tools than as representational texts” (Rose, 2014: 26). This trend unsettles the value and commitments of arts-based scholarship and invites caution towards simplistic or “perfunctory methods” (McNiff, 2013: 111) that seduce researchers into adopting and producing images, limiting the evocative potential of arts-based methodologies. Here, I intend to suggest that there is an important ethical purpose in methods that are together visual and arts-based. This is rooted in circumstances that produce autonomy, originality, ingenuity and spontaneity (Orlinsky, 2006; Carmago-Borges, 2018).

Its primary purpose is to provide an audience with evocative access to multiple meanings, interpretations and voices associated with lived diversity and complexity.

(Bagley and Castro-Salazar, 2012: 241)

Arts-based research deepens the immediate response to the ‘visual’ and invites diverse “ways of creating, presenting and discussing” meaning (Arlander, 2010: 316), amplifying the intrinsic qualities of affective and artistic practices (Cole and Knowles, 2008; Sajnani, 2013), re-presenting experience through an aesthetic un-written semantic.

It is worth recognising a ‘procedural’ distinction in knowledge production and dissemination - that appears in the literature and in practice - between visual methods and arts-based research, tools and principles. A general summary of the distinction denotes the presence of (broadly) two schools of enquiry. On one hand, visual research methods are associated with the use, production and analysis of photographs from/in specific social spaces (Bourdieu, 1990; Pink, 2011; Holm, 2014; Dunne et al., 2017), encompassing “visual aspects of social and cultural life” (Emmison, Smith and

Mayall, 2012: xiv). In this case, photographs in research are a method and vehicle, produced and consumed by participants, researchers and communities, and offer insights into social organization, “unforeseen environments and subjects” (Collier and Collier, 1986: 99). Photographs can also act as visual records of the “outcomes of multisensory contexts, encounters and engagements” (Pink, 2011: 602); and such is the case in the present study. On the other hand, arts-based research (ABR hereafter) embraces a multitude of forms (including photography) and its “unique feature is the making of art by the researcher” (McNiff, 2013: 109). The work of artists/researchers thus acquires sociological and professional *gravitas* that affirms artists’ scholarly capacity.

The merging or interactivity of the two ‘schools’ can encourage a delegation of artistic authority to participants, offering emancipatory and autonomous opportunities to decentralise the role of the product in the form of art and refine the focus on the creative process and the sociological questions it poses.

From an example of experiential research, in studio-based dance, Vincs (2012) observes,

It shifts the focus of dance research from the idea that dance is a product, a repository of knowledge or ideas that can be interrogated and interpreted to the notion of dance as a field in which knowledge is produced.

(*ibid*, 2012: 100)

Committing to a devolution of expressive power to participants, allows artists/researchers to occupy an ethical position from which visual and embodied acts can be understood for their “intellectual complexity and affective discomfort” (Chappell and Chappell, 2016: 297). Further, the distinction between product and

process, its manifestations in polyvocal and embodied expression, recalibrates the value of participation and, in so doing, broadens research horizons to encompass artistic meaning-making while reviewing the quality and social relevance of this type of work (Seidel et al., 2009; Pariser, 2013).

The interactivity between visual methods and ABR can strengthen common goals, endorse socially just research and promote engagement with, and recognition of, authentic and original forms of knowledge creation.

Arts-based methods are evolving “through collaborations between artists and different professions, for the most part in applied arts fields” (McNiff, 2013: 111). The possibilities of the arts have increasingly attracted social researchers and invited a progressive move from using different kinds of visuals to enacted and embodied art forms that “promote autonomy” and improvisation (Chilton and Leavy, 2014: 403). The resulting range of material outcomes is beginning to generate representations that participants and social scientists can use to articulate and analyse personal experiences - of sociological significance - in original and relevant ways (Siegesmund, 2014; Cahnmann-Taylor, 2018). Yet, the tendency to measure outcomes against ‘clean’ qualitative parameters continues to affect the extent to which participants experience creative freedom in research. An apparent demand for order in the form and nature of research outcomes as data “can call up the desire to pre-empt possible insights by foreclosing, reducing, categorising and simplifying” expressive narratives (Sajnani, 2013: 80). Moreover, the appropriation and discovery of artistic skills and researcher authority are kept apart, and seldom explored with participants, for a fear of destabilising rigour and validity (Barone and Eisner, 2012). “This mind set may be generated more from within applied arts professions eager for

justification according to conventional academic criteria than imposed from without” (McNiff, 2013: 111). This perspective sits within a context of divergence between arts practice and research validity, often in competition, thus withholding the potential to offer new and multiple points of entry for participants and audiences. Visual methods and ABR can unsettle research rhetoric on ethics and other methodological discourses that invade children’s experiences in (and of) research (Belluigi, 2018). Providing opportunities to experience visual, arts-based, methods that invite creativity and agency can challenge inequity (Huss, 2013), offering new perspectives for the appraisal of social stratification to both new and established audiences and stakeholders, and provoke change. While exploring the practical, ethical and aesthetic potential of ABR, it is necessary to be cautious of the assumption that visual methods inherently offer the academic community a way of establishing inclusivity in research (Ollerton, 2012; Nind, 2014; Foster, 2016; Penketh, 2017). This view becomes apparent in the tentative culture of employing visual methods in research with children, in which non-directive interpretations, creative authority and autonomy continue to appear underexplored and underdeveloped (Siegesmund, 2014).

2.3 Autonomy, creativity and improvisation

I recognise that arts-based research is one route into rendering participation more meaningful and engaging, and for producing socially active work that can engender new ways of looking and thinking about children, dis/ability and participatory capabilities (Eisner, 1993; Stirling, 2015; Penketh, 2017). Educational and sociological research offers numerous perspectives to explore children’s capabilities,

their values and views in a number of ways that emphasise their right to embody social agency (Alderson, 2008a; Corsaro, 2018; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018; Wyness, 2018). Importantly, it is crucial to identify a collective commitment in researchers' disposition to ensure that research participants are involved as active members in a wider sociological process in which participation evolves into relational and political action. This powerful and civic objective interrogates the purpose of participation, creative approaches and art in research, as means to question and explore dominant discourses on agency and social life in different (geographic and cultural) contexts. Arts-based practices can "promote an exchange between researcher and researched that is not only more collaborative and egalitarian but actively beneficial to the research participants" (Leavy, 2015: 178). This approach brings together the sociological value of arts participation and my practical awareness around the use of visual and experiential methods to produce and convey "knowledge that is based on resonance and understanding" (*ibid*, 2015: 3). My choice to focus on arts-based creative methods is guided by my own experience of arts education and arts practice, and sociological perspectives rooted in structuralist theory (Bourdieu, 2005a) and civic discourse (Gramsci, 1992). Visual and tangible creative processes can engage nuanced realities, momentum and affect, offering new literacies for enlightenment that embody cultural currency and sociological *gravitas* (Marsh, 2015). Further, by entering the creative process, children and young people have the authority to explore their interests and to question and deconstruct convention by representing their views of the world (Parry, 2015). Creative processes invite different audiences "into the experiencing aspects of a world that may have been otherwise outside their range of sight and to thereby cause them to question the usual,

commonplace, orthodox perspectives on social phenomena” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 56). My own activity and enjoyment of arts practices play an important role in my decision to offer experiential tools to articulate personal experiences, including cultural and social ones, in creative and practical ways. My own experiencing of creative processes cannot exclude my understanding of the enabling capacity of visual and experiential practice. The ‘maker/artist/participant’ can enter into a dialogue with personal narratives that communicate ideas and values in ways that jar with the expected and conventional, making room for new narratives and questions (Springgay, 2008; Barone and Eisner, 2012). Performing meaning cannot transcend the influence of the enjoyment of improvisation in the use of creative tools and the role of affect in its aesthetic possibilities (Foster, 2012; Levine, 2013). Artistic methods can enable the embodiment of agentic freedom to explore self-presentation, spontaneity and meaning in different disciplines including research as social and educational enquiry. In producing work that is socially significant, through art, it is useful to note that there are multiple avenues to improvisation and spontaneity. I have chosen ones that express more aptly the relational nature of artistic meaning-making in this study, these are definitions borrowed from theatre, therapy and play (Sajnani et al., 2011; Sajnani, 2013; Learmonth and Huckvale, 2013; Mannay, Staples and Edwards, 2017; Thomas, 2017). Improvisation and spontaneity are generated in a dialogue that manifests between artist, environment and one’s own social repertoire, “it is an approach to knowledge creation that invites fleeting, emergent and evolving discoveries unfolding on canvas, in writing and onstage as they do in life” (Sajnani, 2013: 82). Like improvisation and research, “spontaneity does not operate in a vacuum but in relation to already structured phenomena, cultural and social

conserves” (Moreno, 1955: 364). Moreno (1955) suggests a stance that minimises the apparent divide between the creative and sociological self. By attuning to this definition, I attempt to illustrate the iterative quality of visual performance, agency and structures, to analyse artistic methods and aesthetic content as products of the intimate and broad social context. Focusing on the sociological value of improvisation in research, it is possible to challenge the uncertainties tied to this “emerging approach to enquiry” and reframe researchers’ responsiveness to “risk” (Sajnani, 2013: 77).

Researchers who draw upon creative practice as a medium of knowledge creation and representation require and often rely upon skills that are central to improvisation, such as openness to uncertainty, an attunement to difference [...].

(ibid, 2013: 77)

Improvisation is an essential ethical device. It allows participants to establish aesthetic codes and symbols that create the leading thread of their experiential narrative; it manifests in the ways participants enter and appropriate their creative space and the interactions within it. Making meaning through visual and tactile experience can prepare both the researcher and the lay observer to appreciate the processes of expression in which art is created and embodied, without predetermined demands or questions. “These kinds of projects enable the co-construction of knowledge, and allow all partners, including children and young people, to bring their expertise to the table” (Marsh, 2015: 197). Drawing attention to the relevance of creative tools challenges the canon, the dominant textual narrative, “not by proffering a new counter-narrative, but by luring an audience into an appreciation of an array of diverse, complex, nuanced images and partial, local portraits of human growth and

possibility” (Barone, 2008: 39). Co-producing spaces in which participants can enjoy and discover creative freedoms allows artists and observers to explore the unforeseeable, provoking attention towards salient social issues pertaining to individuals and groups, who may otherwise be disenfranchised from social action.

Valuing meaning: experiential methods and therapy informed practice

Links between ABR, the creative arts therapies and sandplay therapy, are both evident and useful in developing purposeful and ethical research spaces and addressing the position and disposition of the observer/adult/researcher (Kalff, 1980; Mannay et al., 2017). The contribution of therapy to the deployment of arts-based methods can be critical in activating social action and change. I consider the notions of spontaneity, improvisation and creative freedom from merging points of view: as a pedagogue, artist and researcher. There are valuable insights to be drawn from therapy, and person-centred approaches in particular, in the development of socially engaged methodologies. Person-centred values, such as those practised in arts therapies and sandplay, critically address the centrality of individual perceptions, agency and choice in the context of participation (Kalff; 1980; Cox, 2005; Cooper and McLeod, 2011; Huss, 2013; Bernardi, 2019a). Adults/therapists/researchers can actively engage in a responsive process by incorporating person-centred principles in their practice. Participants’ views and strategies in the research space, like in the therapeutic domain, can and should serve as an ‘orientating guide’ to inform interactions, adapt participatory devices and develop a collaborative activity (Cooper and McLeod, 2011). Moreover, this adaptability enables researchers to practice reflexivity in ways that explicitly problematize ethical considerations around choice,

relevance of methods, power and the recognition of multiple subjectivities. Cooper and McLeod (2011) suggest a pluralistic outlook that encourages responsiveness towards a multiplicity of experiences, favouring experiential autonomy over directivity. Their pluralistic and experiential approach sees diversity as a quality to be prized. Taking a critical stance towards diagnosis, they reject “psychological and psychotherapeutic systems which strive to reduce individual human experiences down to nomothetic, universal laws and mechanisms”, suggesting that methods should be developed to elevate agency and autonomy (*ibid*, 2011: 213). This idiographic view is rooted in a deeply ethical commitment to individual stories, to relational interactions in the “person-centered field”, thus “engaging with an Other in a profoundly honoring way” (*ibid*).

Here, I hope to emphasise the valuable ‘proximity’ between artistic practices and person-centred therapy. This is relevant to both the disposition of the adult/therapist, researcher or educator, and the considerate and sensitive development of physical and relational contexts in which the values and wishes of participants are respected (Kalff, 1980; Thomson and Hall, 2008). The interweaving of threads from the critical and sociological, the humanist and therapeutic, demands that unusual and complex renditions of experience, in material, creative and embodied form, are understood as part of an ethical responsibility to “unveil how categories of self and other are constructed, and reframe those seemingly natural perspectives” (Woo, 2018: 21). The exchange between experiential therapies and arts-based methods in research (with children and young people) is together necessary and compelling.

It would be possible to instigate a variety of exchanges between art forms and forms of therapy, which would derive similar intentions, to explore the marriage between

making and meaning. For this purpose, I studied the interdisciplinary cultures of arts-based research and therapies using visual methods (here I include sandplay), to adapt the ethical receptivity and sociological value of tangible, material and embodied experiences that can be captured visually. Enhancing and re-presenting the way meaning can be constructed by involving visual, verbal and nonverbal communicative practices (Hackett and Yamada-Rice, 2015), I argue that multiple literacies can offer salient clues to confront methodological tensions around agency and validity. While emphasising the sociological relevance of meaningful participation and presentation, in revealing matters of identity, agency and capability, researchers should be prepared to engage with creativity and originality (Orlinsky, 2006), being present in the process of visual and material engagement. Further, a socially critical rendition of art therapy can contextualise meaning-making within culture and power relations, exploring expression that is embedded in cultural processes and social structures (Mahon, 2000; Huss, 2013), extending the rubric of art therapy “that tends to be based on dynamic or humanistic understandings of art as expressed from within” (Huss, 2013: 7).

Accordingly, this philosophy requires flexibility in the strategies used to respect and accommodate social and internalised visions, allowing “the unanticipated to emerge” (Marshall and Rossman, 1999: 23) to investigate commonality and diversity in children’s experiences of self (Christensen and James, 2017), “disability branding” (DePoy and Gilson, 2014: 28) and the deterministic role of common sense (De Certeau, 1984; Gramsci, 1992; Sheringham, 2009; Pink, 2012, Crehan, 2016).

The literature identifies ethical implications and benefits of arts-based methodologies; and their relevance to the development of diverse and accessible modes of

participation as well as critical outputs for dissemination (Bresler, 2008; McNiff, 2013; Sajnani, 2013; Leavy, 2015). Artistic enquiry can surprise, evoke empathy and affirm personal narratives while engaging new and experienced audiences in explicit conversations of social and methodological worth. My transition through the literature has allowed me to identify these possibilities, to enter a narrative of appreciation of the multiple forms of self-realisation and unpredictability “that effective arts-based research generates” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 59). I argue that there is scope for arts-based research not to be situated in competition with traditional research practices, or subordinated to these by habit. Arts-based research, rather, should be concurrent to traditional forms of enquiry that are socially affirmative in nature (Siegesmund, 2014). Arts-based research provides different tools and lenses to question social problems through unconventional modalities that can inform academia and wider communities alike in novel ways (Eisner, 1998; Hernández-Hernández and Fendler, 2013). However, the academe remains somewhat tentative around acknowledging and fostering opportunities for enrichment and dialogue integral to the relationship between conventional and artistic methodologies, symbolic and visceral engagement (Learmonth and Huckvale, 2013; McNiff, 2013). It is worth noting that, “in this era demanding evidence-based research, the presentation of artistic results can have a significant impact, especially when clearly connected with social needs” (McNiff, 2013: 115). In turn, I argue that the complementarity of traditional and artistic approaches to inquiry if misinterpreted could reduce experiential choices for participants, researchers and their audiences; and risk underplaying the potential ABR has in producing alternative viewpoints, social alertness and action. As a result, artistic products in educational research can

be limited, often constructed, produced and framed in spaces that fit with traditional qualitative paradigms. In addition, directed modes of participation risk forestalling the appearance of “as-yet unknown choices of actions” (Fels, 2015: 112) that all ethical researchers should commit to evoking. It is through collaborative expressive engagement that researchers and participants can investigate creative, critical and nuanced social concerns through embodied action, using “the strategies and medium of arts practices” (*ibid*, 2015: 113).

These premises are crucial in sustaining the ethical balance between children and the researcher, present in the (creative) encounters, fostering multimodality of choice and personal expositions, resonances and observations. The actions and interactions in the creative acts are thus to be seen and heard. Positioning aesthetic outcomes in a landscape of sociological change and civic attentiveness has the potential to go beyond researcher integrity and scripted academic protocol.

In order to address the merits of the arts, critical pedagogy and therapy, I engage with the contributions that these fields make to establishing methods that are together meaningful and socially just. Arts-based research practices invite an exploration of the ways researchers and other social actors can attend to critical knowledges and experiences that traditional methods might obscure. Beyond a discussion on methods and *outcomes as data*, the salience of ABR ‘relies’ on creating environments that enable the realisation of choice and agency in concrete form. My interest in pursuing deep and evocative modes of participation that are the source and vehicle for concretizing personal meanings is guided by an aspiration for the arts and research “to transform rather than simply describe” (Huss, 2016: 84). The dialogic principles fostered in therapy transposed to enhance the validity and meaningfulness of arts-

based research with children, and other underrepresented groups, are a central aspect of this work. Weaving therapy-informed and arts-based methods with a critical theoretical framework, this approach integrates pedagogic principles and aesthetics in research, thus extending the contributions of cultural, sociological and educational studies that use visual methods for the spontaneous articulation of meaning. These principles, importantly, focus on the relational nature of the processes shared in a meaningful context, “the moment-to-moment co-constructive processes through which meaning is negotiated” (Westcott and Littleton, 2009: 144). These ideas should be unequivocal, manifested in the concrete presentation of resources, in the flexible modes of communication with, and available to, participants and in the development of trust and one’s own reflexivity in the research domain (Hickman, 2008); and in the provision of a protected environment for children to explore visual materials and personal capabilities in safety and comfort. While my experience of the visual prompts me to question the value of “conventional-looking scholarship” (Cole and Knowles, 2008: 57), my civic agency and positioning are invested in finding ways of drawing together artistic practice and relational participation, interaction and interpretation, that celebrate and respect children’s agency, uncharted possibilities and perceptions.

My reflexivity has evolved into a composite stance that seeks to engage the potential of an active, radical and aesthetic role that reframes researcher privilege. Like Cole and Knowles (2008), I have found that exploring “the promises and possibilities” of artistic practice can engage cultural, personal, resources and values, “reawakening an excitement for our work” and its sociological and civic potential (*ibid*, 2008: 58).

They reconnected us with our long-held epistemological roots and brought together elements of our personal and professional lives that had, to that point, been forced apart by academic orthodoxy.

(Cole and Knowles, 2008: 58)

Reflexivity can engage and invest creative resourcefulness and autonomy to reshape the social role of the researcher and invigorate participants' agency, engendering a culture of flexibility towards non-literal representation and relationality in research.

2.4 Art and expression in child-centred pedagogies

To remove the conditional ordering of expectations that pervades both education and research I foreground children's creative authority as agency. Children's artistic literacies and my own aesthetic sensibilities legitimise heterogeneity in participatory possibilities that can inform and provoke attentiveness towards novel ways of researching and understanding. These possibilities invite openness towards children's capability to produce forms of social experience, activating alternative solutions and questions, which can enter the civic space as art *and* as data (Malchiodi, 2018).

This openness is contrary to more circumscribed approaches to research in most fields and the expanse of possibilities presents tensions.

(McNiff, 2013: 110)

These tensions can be explored through critical pedagogic and sociological lenses, to comprehend the contribution of ABR methodologies to researching with children in respect of their agency and creative autonomy. The reliance on adult-led tasks in education and in research is still inherent in the use of methods designed to involve

and question children as learners and as participants. These conditions inhibit children's social agency and the development and expression of inner resourcefulness that renders agency visible and personally significant. It is useful to consider the contribution of critical pedagogy in elevating, understanding and recognising children's ability to contribute to their social reality (Montessori, 1938; Alderson, 2017; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018). Autonomy, dialogue and choice are essential in activating children's agency in research that coheres with authenticity and has the potential to elicit social ramifications. "Montessori found that deep concentration often occurs when children are free to choose their tasks" (Crain and Fite, 2013: 106). With this in mind, the purpose of involving children in spontaneous activities, designed as a response to their choices, is together a significant premise in the development of a meaningful model for research participation and a means to provide the ethical space in which children are able to express their views, in a context that is protected from adult directives, assumptions and discourses.

The moral and ethical value of the lessons from child-centred and critical pedagogies has been central in developing a reflexive stance across roles, as a teacher, a researcher and as an observer amongst participants in my present role. Crucially, it is through my research and training in education and the arts that I align a person-centred methodological approach with the development of 'expressive tools' for participation, thus revisiting the value of autonomy and creativity in research and the role of critical pedagogy in enabling access to multiple literacies for self-presentation.

Critical pedagogy, agency and situated inequalities

The participatory principles examined in critical pedagogy are intrinsic in my ontological position and underline the significance of engaging individuals on the margins when planning meaningful participation and spaces in which personal actions are valued. The processes that have the potential to lead to social change are rooted in such spaces. Consistent with arts-based research, spaces of relationality and exploration are fundamental in the study of identity, presentation and re-presentation as forms of agency. I argue that critical pedagogy can positively influence researchers' disposition towards diverse opportunities to engage and participate, thus re-evaluating the terms of participation, insight and meaning. Material tools and personal resourcefulness in dedicated creative spaces can invigorate reflexivity and choice, affecting participants and researchers alike (Barone and Eisner, 2012).

The principles of critical pedagogy, endorsed in this study, have dual relevance: to inform the use of arts-based methods for autonomous participation in research and to question the models of social participation available to children (labelled by society). The work of Paulo Freire (1970, 2018/1970) reflects this dual intent, contributing to an understanding of the conditions, contradictions and inequalities that oppose the natural freedoms of individuals and forestall the possibilities to contribute to one's own civic society. The pedagogic and sociological impact of Freire's work, culminating in the awakening of the Brazilian people through participation in education, is relevant to challenging methods that prolong images of difference, ordering and othering.

By resisting a process of reflexivity, that examines the quality of engagement of personal freedoms, researchers can contribute to preserving the societal conditions

that produce inequality. Freire (2018) argues that “if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection” it creates both “unauthentic forms of existence” and “unauthentic forms of thought, which reinforce the original dichotomy” (*ibid*, 2018: 88). Freire’s model of pedagogy enables a careful reflection on research methods, for children (and adults), to activate and repurpose experiences of personal value and provide opportunities to access creative and representational literacies that can influence and inform the process of change.

Importantly, it is in the opportunity to access diverse literacies, such as autonomous and creative functionings, that the presentation of self through choice produces dignity and agency. Freire’s pedagogic philosophy was the active response to his society’s immunity to inequality at a time of needed political reform. Freire’s work - thus - is salient in unsettling and reviewing methodological habits that maintain order, through control and ‘silencing’, affecting participation and dissemination that can be together exclusionary and exclusive. A critical research activity, that promotes agency and reflection, aligns with Freire’s idea of dialogue as an “existential necessity” (Freire, 2018: 88) that has transformative potential and cannot exist in a “relation of domination” (*ibid*, 2018: 89).

And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants.

(Freire, 2018: 88-89)

By attending to children’s ideas, agency and choices, methodologies informed by critical pedagogy can generate original insights into worlds often represented in

reductive ways. Honouring children's creativity and capability in a process that is based on freedom and autonomy, thus rejecting the prescription of directive methods "which robs others of their words" (*ibid*, 2018: 88), arts-based researchers can be critical in generating dialogue and expressing and embodying researcher/observer humility. Research, participation and dissemination become - this way - a partnership for renaming the world, for reviewing the tools and environments that facilitate and ignite agency in a dialogue that requires openness, courage, faith and mutual trust "for the recovery of the people's stolen humanity" (Freire, 2018: 95).

The value of being present: dialogic observation in Montessori and Freire

It is true that some pedagogues, led by Rousseau, have given voice to impracticable principles and vague aspirations for the liberty of the child, but the true concept of liberty is practically unknown to educators.

(Montessori, 2014/1935: 15)

Montessori's critique reflects the dominance of teacher-led and, more generally, interventionist approaches to children's participation and knowledge. It is useful to revisit this persistent culture to explore the value attributed to children's capability, agency and freedom in participating in an inquiry on their worlds and priorities.

Drawing on the teachings of critical pedagogy and child-centred practices can inform and balance research interactions and promote the recognition of children's capabilities and personal narratives. "The power of observation, through experience or imagination, can create images and words that hold our attention" (Dozier, 2017), their visual and tactile qualities can contribute knowledge that has social and political significance. The presentation of visual/visible outcomes, as both interpretation and

enactment of experience, can encourage a process of articulation and reception of personal priorities, stories and desires. “Our calling as artists and researchers is to deeply listen and to hold with great gentleness the sacredness of the work of creating” (Snowber and Bickel, 2015: 67), and commit to a shift from knowledge that is measurable to knowledge that is transformative, “a matter of the depth of the soul, spirit, embodied knowing and being” (van Manen, 1989: 234).

Too often researchers have conveyed the impetus of a children’s rights approach to research, to establish ethical guiding principles in policies and methodologies, however these are rarely translated into equitable engagement (Leitch and Mitchell, 2007; Thomson, 2008; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017; Davis et al, 2017). Research processes with children can produce data that mimic the tendency to impose, delimit, foreclose and simplify opportunities to explore a multitude of possibilities and insights, through which children can engage their competences to interpret and illuminate sociological concerns.

2.5 Art as a product of socio-cultural experience and as method

The central thread in ethical qualitative research should involve communication and representation that are multimodal and rich, less reliant on words, in an effort to involve and participate in acts that can be emancipatory, affective, imaginative and experiential in character (Eisner, 1991; MacBeath et al., 2003; Barone, 2006; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Christensen and James, 2017). Researchers invested in the arts (visual and performative), working with children and adults in a variety of contexts, have discussed the benefits of alternative forms of representation to involve

participants more effectively (Goodman, 1968; Barone, 2008; Thomson, 2008; Foster, 2016).

Providing alternative linguistic devices is crucial in the process of enabling the expression and study of “personal meanings, experience(s), and interpretations” of complex power relations and social structures (Leitch and Mitchell, 2007: 54; Blumenfeld-Jones, 2018; Woo, 2018). Methods employing creative conditions, as endorsed in the arts, can lead to an appreciation of the aesthetic value of artefacts produced in a research context that offers meaningful engagement through experience, choice, movement and embodiment. Tangible and visual outcomes, produced in research, can also contribute to reviewing the processes involved in arts-based enquiry and crucially the validity of its methods as sociological and agentic devices.

The critical agentic perspective explored by producing visual and material outcomes in a creative research space is an established concept in practitioner-led ABR, and its sociological advantages are widely recognised in contemporary research (Foster, 2012, 2016; Cahnmann-Taylor, 2018). Researchers have often employed their own art form (music, dance, performance and visual art, etc.) to develop ways to expose personal concerns, multiple identities and sociological conditions, skilfully represented through experiential and generative production. In other cases, the creative industries have provided the visual methods and a platform for democratising visibility in emancipatory community research projects (Chilton and Leavy, 2014; Stirling and Yamada-Rice, 2015; Foster, 2016; Campbell, Lassiter and Pahl, 2018). The merits of these forms of aesthetic social activism are significant in embracing multimodality of meaning, participation, representation and dissemination.

However, the merging of arts-based methods and researching with children with ethical, practical and expressive authenticity can appear problematic (Leitch and Mitchell, 2007; Carmago-Borges, 2018; Nind and Lewthwaite, 2018). It is important to commit to and engage with children's views through manifestations of autonomy, self and agency that artistic activities can enhance.

The use of artistic methods is therefore an important social issue in its own right. Art practitioners and social scientist alike (and those who juggle the two identities in their practice) must engage conscientiously in the development of methods that are accessible and inviting in material terms. Representation through visual means should be neither arduous or technically exclusive; thus, researchers should aim to co-develop meaningful creative environments and tools that are relevant, inviting and empowering.

Enabling the production of tangible representations of lived experience can provide salient entry points for participants to explore personal capabilities and for researchers to respect personal direction, resourcefulness and interpretation.

I believe researchers, institutions and artists have a duty to awaken the possibility to challenge common sense social phenomena through methods that engage participants authentically. Concurrently, it is important not to underestimate the complexities of artistic products and equally to induce the emergence of such complexities to establish the value of the deep engagement that arts-based methods can offer, to the research community, to permeate a more equitable social debate (Lather, 2007; Thomson, 2008).

Making art as text in research: aesthetics, pedagogy and politics

The conditions for meaningful participation established in a creative environment and the material interactions with a variety of media can produce and communicate personal interpretations of experience, evoking new meanings and questions (Read, 1943; Eisner, 1981; Strand, 1998; Barone, 2006, 2008; Woo, 2008; Leavy, 2015). Artistic and material participation can contribute to interrogating presuppositions tied to children's capability (in particular) and methodological assumptions around representation and validity more generally (Sullivan, 2010; Chilton and Leavy, 2014; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018). Aesthetic expression can invite multiple forms of meaning-making and interpretation, through processes of embodied, visual and tangible representation (Gallagher, 2010; Fels, 2015). Photography as method and as a process for representing data, 'framing' temporal practices for the purpose of dissemination, has also attracted researchers for its social and methodological significance (Pink, 2011; Holm, 2014; Rose, 2014; Dunne et al., 2017). The literature shows that there are continuing efforts to consolidate the validity of the visual as text in research (Eisner, 1997; Sullivan, 2006; Barone, 2008; Thomson, 2008; Dozier, 2017; Pentassuglia, 2017), but there is also reason to problematize the habit to convert visual, creative and aesthetic experience into literal forms of data for scientific reasoning and dissemination (Sartre, 1988; Grosvenor and Hall, 2012). Busch (2009) argues that, in practice-led processes, "the resulting art productions are characterized by an interdisciplinary procedural method, in which artworks are created within a broader, theoretically informed framework" (*ibid*, 2009: 1). Moreover, aesthetic products can become the site and 'vessel' of meaning-making that has social influence, encouraging and valuing self-understanding (Figal, 2015).

The common goal of artist-researchers and ABR scholars thus is to engage with both the complexity of aesthetics and a deep understanding of human experience, “allowing them to be seen in a previously unavailable light” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 122). Aesthetic data can elicit matters of political worth, in forms that offer multiple perspectives and diverse points of entry, “in which no single point of view regarding textual content is privileged over others” (*ibid*). The “politics of perspective” therefore “pertains to issues of power” in research like other socio-cultural fields (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 122), prompting a search for methods and conditions that illustrate the potential of aesthetic and ethical participation.

Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships (which presupposes a certain idea of thought’s effectivity).

(Rancière, 2013: 10)

Aesthetic data can enhance possibilities for self-presentation and capture critical “moments” of creative intent in research, producing multiple and relational meanings that “enrich trajectories of understanding” and contribute to the political, ethical and social conversation (Carlsen and Dutton, 2011: 214). This type of research leads to an autonomous and experiential awakening of participants’ agency and a critical and socially engaged responsiveness to its multimodal articulation on the part of the researcher (Schön, 1983; Sartre, 1988; Rowsell, 2015).

The interdisciplinary appeal of ABR and the plural perspectives offered by its practices provide a range of experiential tools that participants can appropriate to manifest and articulate personal meanings. Research, thus, becomes a generative

process that produces methodological questions, advances new ideas for the manifestation of subjective narratives and situates the researcher in an active role in the engagement of personal capabilities (her/his own and those of participants), these are the “wellsprings of motivation and insight that sustain qualitative researchers” (Carlsen and Dutton, 2011: 15). Aesthetic products provide insights for researchers (and other audiences) to understand the social role of ABR epistemologies in validating their contribution to educational research, through exchanges that challenge power differentials and inequality (Eisner, 1998). Engagement with the arts prompts questions beyond the methodological, pedagogic and participatory significance of ABR, it deepens the analytical focus on matters at the interface between nuanced interpretations and structured relations. Aesthetic, unpredictable and performative outcomes can guide questions on inequality and educational habit. “The arts are harnessed to matters of social, academic, and artistic significance” (Gallagher, 2010: 36), as well as social and cultural agency. This view of educational research “offers a new way of seeing an old problem” (*ibid*, 2010: 38), opens the doors to diverse possibilities and audiences, removing premeditated objectives and raising multiple questions drawing attention to facets of experience often hidden by reoccurring discourse.

Aesthetics and generativity in children’s art

In considering the use of arts-based methods in research with children and their role in creating a visual and textual narrative of perceptions, experiences and stories, it is necessary to evaluate the generative potential of artistic practices. Generativity (Erikson, 1950) plays a valuable role in validating the ethical character of ABR.

Erikson's view of generativity includes products of creativity (Rubinstein et al., 2015), thus it is possible to develop an approach to material processes and aesthetic interactions that serve to articulate personal capabilities beyond dissemination.

The narrative psychology version of generativity points to research as a site for the production of personal legacies, and the importance of the life of ideas outside the time-bound context of research projects.

(Carlsen and Dutton, 2011: 16)

With this intent, an arts-based methodology can create the dialogic conditions to engage with children as creators of culture. Children's agency and art in research must be recognised as interpretation of and responsiveness to issues of political weight and social concern, that can develop and propagate their agentic status beyond research.

Imagery and symbols that emerge through experiential processes and derive from children's creative authority have the potential to awaken public consciousness. Such an awakening should begin in the mind of the researcher, to counter the dominant culture of directive methods (Stone, 1988; Barone, 2008) and convey perspectives that honour children's creativity, capability and agency. If research is to be 'socially engaged' as recommended by Barone (2008), there needs to be a commitment to the value of art as a form of civic participation and embodied experience, this way it is possible to interrogate the impact of social forces on children and childhood. These premises hold a moral imperative, that all children can embody decisions and interpretations and refer to these through the creative process (Thomson and Hall, 2008).

2.6 Chapter conclusion

Arts-based research has had an increase in popularity as a methodological approach to research participation and interpretation (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2018). From using photographs and objects to extending image production to participants, arts-based researchers are progressively advancing the formulation of multimodal forms of expression as well as dissemination.

The review of the literature provides the opportunity to foreground the interdisciplinary quality of this study, interrogating methodological habits that either misinterpret or undervalue experiential art forms when investigating sociological issues with children. In turn, the review has informed the critical methodological decisions taken herein. The principles of arts-based research and therapies and the potential they offer to engage with alternative discourses around autonomy, both methodological and participatory, are essential to the development of an ethical, egalitarian and creative epistemology.

The review has enabled me to identify the originality of this study; I have drawn from a range of academic fields, the arts, critical pedagogic legacies and therapy-informed approaches, and combined them to contribute an innovative methodological approach to researching with children, in meaningful and dialogic spaces. Within this interdisciplinary context, the global enterprise to improve participation and to value and disseminate children's contributions to research is advanced. The structure and the purpose of this chapter illustrate the interplay between disciplines, methods and intentions in this research project and my own positionality in this endeavour. The literature has provided further opportunities to reflect on the dominance of linguistic systems in adult-led discourses in society, education and research. The organization

of the chapter puts forward links that integrate arts-based research practices, pedagogy and therapy guiding my methodological and ethical decisions in the formulation of a researcher identity that engages creative practice with social activism. This form of activism comes to life when researchers engage attentively with socially just interactions, processes and ‘products’ derived from creative, visual and embodied expression. Developing creative methods with participants, to ensure the tools for achieving independent self-expression are meaningful, draws on the principles of critical pedagogy, translating experiential intentions into tactile and concrete communication in research. Invigorating the sociological value of pursuing a creative methodology with children can enhance participation in research, representing subjectivities and questioning sociological habit through autonomy and experiential meaning-making that provokes connections, establishes empathy and alters perceptions (Barone, 2008).

It is necessary to develop a more complex understanding of ABR by being sensitive to the theory that grounds its diverse interpretations, “connecting that philosophical concern to features of the debilitating sociopolitical matrix in which young people live their lives” (*ibid*, 2008: 43). Concurrently, arts-based researchers draw attention towards the quality of the methods used, to preserve the meaningfulness of these approaches and the powerful multi-faceted outcomes these can generate. Thus, it is possible to develop and extend the contribution of arts-based research to working with children, by creating the conditions that render participation relevant and deeply engaging. The critical pedagogic values invested in this approach to research are reflected in the ‘nature’ of the physical environment in which participation develops, to foreground children’s spontaneity and improvisation, which are powerful vehicles

to appraise the validity of the research encounters and affirm children's capabilities and agency. This stance enables a review of researchers' privilege and the ethical promise of establishing the conditions for children to be 'seen' and 'heard' as socially active individuals (Kaplan, 2008; Lomax, 2015), to explore the ways that person-centred therapy and pedagogies can inform the co-production of a relevant and sustainable research space that takes into account children's choices and perceptions. By maximising opportunities for the emergence of diverse and original contributions, which capture and convey children's subjectivities, ABR can be a vehicle for social change.

The development of interdisciplinary processes of expression and the concurrent reflections on sociological theory can help establish alternative ways of seeing and presenting experience, to better understand the impact of social structures on children's formulation of their identity. My search has included explorations of creativity and visual methods in fields such as critical pedagogy, sandplay therapy, the arts therapies and aesthetics. My initial thoughts around establishing my research philosophy led me to separate my pedagogic beliefs and arts practice from my approach to research. However, it is through interrogating the discomfort found in this discrimination between roles that I became aware of the important opportunity to adopt a person-centred educational lead and my arts training, together; to establish a context in which theory and practical skills from both fields can be deployed - with purpose - to develop a multi-modal methodology. By attuning to this epistemological consciousness I was able to 'inhabit' the research space in a more natural and skilful way, prepared to embark on a search for leads that not only support the use of affective and ethical participatory methods, but also provide practical ways to invest

in creative and multi-modal pursuits that are valid and rigorous in research. My focus on the transferable principles of critical pedagogy, therapy and art, and their role in enabling participation are central in this epistemology.

Examining the ethical implications of researching with children and my commitment to their ability to contribute to civic society has informed the development of methods that stem from the experiential and accessible nature of materials and the co-construction of relevant spaces (physical and conceptual) in which children's subjectivities can take form, to question social and educational conditionings. The re-evaluation of creativity in research merged with the lessons from the literature, promoting and critiquing the use of artistic competencies, materials and outcomes, can help to promote openness to a plurality of forms of participation that are together ethical, aesthetic and authentic.

Disrupting the canonical modality of form, not only in the products, role and agency of participants, but indeed in the role of researchers, methodological choices and the adaptability of creative practices, can produce research designs that are emergent, evolving, fluid and transformative in nature.

In the next chapter, the concepts of capability, agency and citizenship are explored further, as instrumental and pivotal in providing the conditions that can promote authenticity and enjoyment in research in which children have opportunities to manifest their views and lead questions of sociological value. Additionally, the impact of common sense on the meaningful involvement of children in decision-making, in education and research, will be discussed. By engaging in this type of interdisciplinary work, researchers can enable the emergence of authenticity and

spontaneity in participants' creative and diverse responses, thus rendering research more effective in providing a platform where children's views are valued and central.

The intersection of different disciplinary fields, traditionally organised within definitive epistemic parameters, also provides scope for a critique of data (typically) generated in research with children; thus evidencing methodological *lacunae*, associated with directive methods, which are amplified in research on dis/ability. ABR provides a critical lead for the ethical and creative approach to self-expression endorsed in this study, to stimulate the emergence of subjective 'pictures' of the human condition, using methods that contribute to a sociological investigation of the structures implicated in the formulation of identity and agency. The ethical processes and evocative meanings produced in ABR culminate in representations that have complex aesthetic and narratological potential, and a significant role in expressing self-determination, questioning redundant methodological discourse and incentivising social change.

Chapter 3

Distinction and participation, and the politics of representation in research with children

3.1 Origins of the chapter

This chapter explores issues concerning research recruitment, participation and representation and their ramifications in education and civic engagement. Research accessibility, recruitment and representation can concurrently justify and reproduce the divisions and inequalities that are visible in society.

Sifting mechanisms situate research questions and participants according to structured ideals and methodological interests that become ‘second nature’ and traverse the landscape of research. These mechanisms replicate societal hierarchies and obstruct the possibility of raising new questions and contributing new and nuanced perspectives to social debate. Paradoxically, “academic research is increasingly being measured according to its benefit to the wider society” (Beebeejaun et al., 2014: 37).

Problematizing the distinctions that are apparent in research can help to identify omissions and privileges, in knowledge production, that contribute to affirming societal divisions and disciplinary borders (Ferri and Connor, 2014; Rosen and Twamley, 2018). Research focusing on disability, for example, can reproduce the marginalised role of dis/ability in society and, in the case of research with children, it can “largely reduce children to objects of care”, ‘vulnerable’ recipients of specialised education, intervention and support (Rosen and Twamley, 2018: 2; Beresford et al.,

2007). “The imposition of seemingly coherent and given categories” appears to justify methodological decisions as practical, when these are in fact inherently political (Rosen and Twamley, 2018: 1; Ferri and Connor, 2014; Beaudry, 2016). I argue that these considerations can contest two prevailing and coexisting narratives that deserve attention. One is the power differential between adults and children (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Christensen and James, 2017), the other is the representation of hierarchal distinctions and borderlines between childhoods, produced by adults’ assumptions around children’s abilities (Goeke and Kubanski, 2012; Connolly, 2017; Wickenden, 2019). Moreover, I argue that habitual routes to recruitment and dissemination reproduce distinctions and marginalisation while determining how methodologies are constructed, questions posed and relationships built in the research context (Prout and Tisdall, 2006; Jupp Kina, 2012; Todd, 2012; Horgan, 2016).

In the first part of the chapter, I use a sociological approach to illustrate the nature of children’s recruitment and positionality in research, reviewing a prevailing ‘minority’ discourse in the development of children’s agency and identity in research. I consider how politicised methodological choices and discourses, differential participatory opportunities and exclusionary practices, based on predetermined categories, privilege adults’ redescrptions of children’s abilities and interests. It is worth noting, that prevailing methodological perspectives that appear to be problematic in studies with children can intersect research with other marginalised populations (Ferri and Connor, 2014; Goodley et al., 2016; Runswick-Cole, Curran and Liddiard, 2018). I hope that my discussion can go some way to re-frame research that not only ‘serves’ marginalised groups but also attunes childhood diversity across disciplines and social

fields. The review of the political nature and complexity of participation demonstrates that individuals and communities occupying a marginal role in society become the subjects of distinctions and omissions that are naturalised through ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1992). These omissions exclude diverse forms of agency in textual discourse and research, affecting representation, civic participation and identity (Rice, 2010; Lugg, 2012; Wickenden, 2019).

In the second part of the chapter, I foreground the philosophical and methodological contributions of Gramsci (1992) and Bourdieu (2010/1984), to reposition agency, capability and the epistemology of representation, and explore the dislocation of children’s identities that reflects societal structures, conditionings and negotiations between agents/actors. Gramsci (1992) and Bourdieu (2010) place a significant responsibility on the role of education as a site for the perpetuation of political, often divisive, discourses that emerge in research through the persistence of researcher privilege. Sociological discourse informs my approach to planning the research process, unpacking the relationship between social structuring and the study of childhood. This stance provides epistemological and methodological references for the study of children’s realities as equal and important in spite of their ascribed social position.

The third part of the chapter illustrates how a disproportionate use of text-based methods and outputs in research can affect both participation and representation. I draw on aesthetics as a vehicle for (civic) participation that is together productive and persuasive, to suggest possible ways to engage children in research that attempts to interrupt researchers’ ‘psychological attachment’ to text-based data that can signal an insistence on pursuing ableist trajectories.

3.2 Re-imaging participation, interrogating the political gaze in research

Systematic socio-political processes of distinction arise in the recruitment trends and resulting interactions in research with children, reproducing societal structures that prolong the misrepresentation of diversity (Bourdieu, 2010; Little and Froggett, 2010; Goeke and Kubanski, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy, Hooper and Gillies, 2013; Ferri and Connor, 2014; Goodley et al., 2016).

By contesting an esoteric gaze on childhood and dis/ability, it is possible to question participatory rhetoric and the enactment of research where tools, questions and methods are based on adults' perceptions of children's ability (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). Reframing the civic function of research provokes tensions between ableism and capability, exposing 'common sense' and divisive research discourses, methodologies and methods, based on societal assumptions (Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 2005a). Disrupting the normative canons for participation in research and explicitly recognising capability can encourage new possibilities in the presentation and emancipation of children (Terzi, 2013; Wickenden, 2019). Moreover, revising the availability of material and relational tools for children to express their views can elicit a generative approach to new questions and their dissemination, to reframe authenticity and agency in children's participation and representation in research.

Since the 1990s, contributions to the study of childhood have progressively diversified the representation of children's views (Alderson, 2013; Wyness, 2016; Coyne and Carter, 2018). A critical analysis of recruitment and participation shows that research practices remain largely stratified and confined to distinct academic spheres (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Tisdall and Punch, 2012); reproducing divisions, while "excluding children almost entirely from mainstream debate and

literature” (Alderson, 2015¹). Contemporary childhood sociologists have created a growing interest in children’s views, focusing on citizenship, participation and rights (Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018). Indeed, childhood as a living sociological component of society has populated both scholarly and popular literature, raising the profile of children’s rights often in relation to adulthood (Qvortrup, 1985, 2009). “There are, however, problems, disagreements and limitations in childhood studies, some shared generally amongst the social sciences” (Alderson, 2013: 4), demonstrating that there are deep-rooted material and symbolic distinctions in the representations of childhood that implicitly (or explicitly) conform to the dominant social order (Feldman et al., 2014). International conventions advocating the protection of children’s rights contribute to these ‘disagreements’ (Tisdall and Punch, 2012), on one hand attempting to foster equality in childhood (UN, 1989) on the other reproducing distinctions between childhoods through discourse. These distinctions are often ingrained in geo-cultural location, with a prominent binary represented by the global North and global South discourse (Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019). In differing ways this demonstrates that social exclusions continue to be “deeply embedded in mainstream research” (Guishard, 2009: 85). Socio/geo/cultural common sense intersects with reoccurring research habits determined by presuppositions that confine children’s capability and agency to categories of distinction. Divisive practices pose (sociological) limits on emancipation and on the diversity of the narratives pursued in research, offering minimal improvement in children’s lives (Holt and Holloway, 2006; Nind, 2008; Terzi, 2010; Goldsmith and Skirton, 2015; Rowley and Camacho, 2015; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019).

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Cognitive and behavioural assumptions associated with diagnosis can also compete with children's agency, affecting children's access to participation in ways that reflect their social reality. These considerations raise critical questions about the recruitment process in terms of diversity and access, which can depend on researchers' ability to disrupt social positions and "public opinion, which affect children's daily lives" (Alderson, 2012: 238). Common sense practices can undermine any attempt to dismantle the reproduction of inequalities in research, exacerbating existing and problematic forms of representational disadvantage that subordinate children's autonomy, creativity and choice, and the way agency is conceived and represented (Alderson, 2012; Flewitt et al., 2018). Bordonaro and Payne (2012) note:

Agency is frequently subjected to processes of concealment or correction, or moulded to make it consistent with specific moral and social standards couched as being in the 'best interests of the child'.

(*ibid*, 2012: 368)

Children's representation thus can be partial and inadequate, lacking authentic and ethical recognition, when issues of agency 'concealment or correction' in research (and education) are left unchallenged (Corker and Davis, 2000; Holt and Holloway, 2006; James, 2010; Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

Omissions and discursive intrusions

The undertaking of a brief analysis of distinction in research and in the narratives produced through its dissemination recalls the inherently political nature of 'omissions' in instructional textbooks (Sleeter and Grant, 1991; Apple, 2004; Rice, 2010; Lugg, 2012; Olufemi, 2017). It is through accepted narratives, which become

common sense, that value is attributed to “who gets portrayed and how” (Lugg, 2012: vii), with historically minoritized groups continuing to be “portrayed in texts as ‘other’” (*ibid*; Gramsci, 1992; Shakur and Highet, 2018).

The role of the academe with regard to the omission or misrepresentation of minority groups in/through research is not dissimilar to the persistence of politically entrenched representational *lacunae* in textbooks, thus these are a useful analogy. Similar to instructional materials, research outputs (and the methodological choices that have led to these) can illustrate the political orientation of exclusionary narratives (James, 2010). The textbooks example aptly serves as a comparative tool to reconsider discourses of distinction, omission and generalisation in research. It also affirms the possibility of “an ethnic conception of disability identity” that can anticipate the role of discourse in sifting textual representations of childhood(s), and contributes to endorsing inequality and difference (Shakespeare, 2014: 94). A narrow representation of marginalized groups, rooted in political processes and rhetorical habits, can determine divisions and exclusions in the portrayal of childhood(s) (Norwich, 1993, 2013; James, 2010; Spyrou, 2011). Conversely, research practices that integrate children’s diversity and commonalities, as experienced by children, can advance social and educational mobilization and enable recognition (Alderson, 1995; Christensen and James, 2017; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018). Accommodating the different ways that children choose to exercise their agency is critical in this task (Hartas, 2008; Thomson and Hall, 2008; Tisdall and Punch, 2012).

Researchers’ primary ambition has been to minimise power differences between adults and children, fostering reciprocity and inviting children in the research activity as active members of a shared process of discovery and civic participation

(Christensen and Prout, 2002; Cocks, 2006; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). Methodological, sociological and ethical questions that arise from exploring the terms of engagement for children in research collectively address societal discourses that permeate children's agency and can determine their struggle for recognition (James and Prout, 2015; Alderson, 2017; Christensen and James, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2018; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018). These views draw on "important structural and theoretical concepts" that influence researching with children and produce stratified narratives (James, 2010: 490).

Researchers should be open to encounter children's diverse capabilities "to approach childhood as being heterogeneous, multiple and diverse" (Hartas, 2008: 16). Research outputs that problematize distinctions, such as 'minority discourse' based on class, race or gender, have been useful in improving the representation of minorities defined by social and medical classifications (Ferri and Connor, 2014; Collinson, 2017; Flewitt et al., 2018; Scott-Barrett, Cebula and Florian, 2018). However, the task of representation continues to be perceived as problematic in research with children with dis/abilities (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014).

"Conceptualizing differences among children" is a "contentious educational problem" that proliferates in research associated with systematic differences, deriving from social and medical discourses of distinction (Terzi, 2010: 36). Adverse responses to difference, whether latent or explicit, result in the perspectives of some children being overlooked, perpetuating their confinement to medicalisation rhetoric (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Ferri and Connor, 2014). Children are frequently represented according to labels which "essentialise differences" that lead to their effective exclusion from mainstream discourse (Wickenden, 2019: 123). Instead, it is necessary and possible

to include children in both “‘mainstream’ child-focused research, and specific disability-oriented projects” (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014: 400; Runswick-Cole et al., 2018).

Broadly, the research landscape shows that the purpose of disciplinary specialization, into fields, produces rigorous and deep investigations informed by situated perspectives on children’s experiences. However, at a granular level there is a visible reminder that children and childhoods are divided by distinctions that result in specific ‘methodological behaviours’ and decisions. To contest presuppositions rooted in directive methods and ability rhetoric it is necessary to explore a different disposition to children’s participation and to their capability to articulate personal narratives (Thomas, 2017). The challenge is to examine accepted assumptions and review, not only the ways that children are invited to participate in research but also, the potential limits that foreclose agency that children bring to the research encounter due to internalised societal conditionings. I argue that methods that emerge in dialogue with children can support a different outlook on participation, for children and researchers, and novel ways of materialising experience.

These reflections have methodological, philosophical, ethical and procedural implications. Christensen and James (2017) question presuppositions that position children as methodologically different from adult respondents/participants; this understanding can be extended to the disabled/nondisabled dyad (Wickenden, 2019). Researchers should be adaptive while aware of the limiting societal presuppositions in which research interactions are enmeshed; “to deconstruct the essentialism with which the study of children and childhood has often been - and sometimes still is - approached” (Christensen and James, 2017: 4). Importantly, Christensen and James

note that the research process must “intervene, beneficially, in the lives of children” (*ibid*, 2017: 3); from researchers’ entry in the field, being respectful towards children’s views, to developing methods with children *in situ* (Davis et al., 2008; Alderson, 2017; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017).

A critical “re-examination of the conceptual frameworks that influence children’s representation” is also needed (Christensen, 1994: 4), to avoid reductionist models of participation that are conditioned by cognitive competencies and age, “thereby continuing to exclude particular groups” from participating in research (Christensen and James, 2017: 4). Methodological decisions should not focus on (or propagate) age and ability distinctions, rather, methods should be appropriate “for the *people* involved in the study, for its social and cultural context and for the kinds of research questions that are being posed” (Christensen and James, 2017: 4, my emphasis).

Scott (2008) argues that it is possible to overcome assumed “practical and ethical challenges posed by the inclusion of children” in research (*ibid*, 2008: 88). To do this, persistent, often “unacknowledged and inappropriate” adult centric views and biases must be recognised and redressed (Scott, 2008: 87). Perceived methodological differences and challenges can portray particular directions and discourses as essential and inevitable (Kitchin, 1998; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Wickenden, 2019). Many scholars (see Alderson, 2015; Roberts, 2017; Coyne and Carter, 2018), reviewing the ethical effectiveness of researching with children and their representation, focus on the recognition of power differences between adults and children resulting from societal divisions which exist in everyday contexts (Alderson, 1994, 2017; Mayall, 2008; Corsaro, 2018). However, it is worth extending this argument to visible methodological distinctions between childhoods that are

predetermined and foreclose the recognition of commonalities over differences, in the thematic analysis of children's experiences. I argue that the research community can learn from the impact of societal assumptions, to review critically how these can shape the way research questions are formulated, (pre)determining what researchers are drawn to 'seeing' and 'hearing' in the process of researching children's realities. Interdisciplinarity can favour this type of civic project, and as Olga Nieuwenhuys suggests:

... it amounts to looking for the unexpected and contingent by freely borrowing and mixing concepts, data and methods and techniques of research from separate disciplines. Disciplinary transgressions that put children's perspectives and experiences, including their artistic, literary and material culture, at the centre of analysis can in sum offer a wealth of new information and support endeavours to take children seriously and stand by their side.

(ibid, 2013: 6)

This invitation to 'mix' concepts encourages methodological collaboration, to include researchers and participants' competencies and the complexity and variety of children's realities. It is also possible, through 'mixing concepts', to pay attention to methodological habits that reinforce ableist discourse (Storey, 2007; Wolbring, 2008; Clare, 2009), which reduces the possibilities to explore children's capacity to challenge social injustices (Nieuwenhuys, 2013).

Ableist discourse can interfere with the ways research methodologies are planned and articulated excluding multiplicity and diversity (Goodley, 2017). Research constructed according to reductive discourse can produce "considerable consequences" for children (Grue, 2011: 535). Thus, at the basis of conducting socially-just, moral and ethical, research with children is a need to revisit the ways

children and child agency are viewed and presented in existing studies (Alderson, 2017; Corsaro, 2018), and the extent to which dis/ability models “become restraints rather than tools, restraints both on action and thought” (Grue, 2011: 541).

Alderson (2008, 2015, 2017) and Roberts (2017) call for quality and respect in the methods used to access and present children’s insights and expertise. Methodologies based on perceived cognitive ability and difference, that can undervalue respect, should therefore be questioned and reviewed (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Carter and Coyne, 2018). Researchers’ openness to diversity can also invite different audiences to appreciate the multiple perspectives that are solicited through an adaptive process of participation (Bernardi, 2019a).

“Participation as it is currently constructed is a contested concept on a number of levels” of social, political and economic interest (Horgan et al., 2017: 274). The prevalence of these interests “can be detrimental to the participation of particular groups of children” and to the ethical quality of the participatory tools used and interactions offered (Mathew et al., 2010: 121), reducing children’s capacity to negotiate their positions and perspectives through a personal articulation of their priorities (Tobin and Davidson, 1990). Conversely, by being open to children’s competencies and agency, researchers can establish “a very different way of understanding” the impact of societal discourses on children and their evolving identities (Connolly, 2017: 105; Spyrou, 2011; Corsaro, 2018).

Corsaro (2018) suggests addressing the equal value of children and researchers’ contributions through a reflexive activity that involves shaping the development of the research process together (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). Children’s views, including views on participation and on the researcher, their choices, concerns and

values must be included in this process of development, reflexivity and flexibility (Connolly, 2017; Davis et al., 2017; Corsaro, 2018). At best, methods designed with children should allow such flexibility to be visible (Thomson and Hall, 2008), encouraging children's competencies throughout the process (Christensen and James, 2008; Connolly, 2017). Children, thus, are recognised as experts in their own interpretation of their social reality and everyday lives (Fleet and Harcourt, 2018). Research relationships based on these principles can empower children and should be sustained throughout the research process "to keep up a continuing, reflexive dialogue" (Christensen and James, 2017: 7), providing children with the means to present their views in ways that are meaningful and evolving (Pereira et al., 2016; Flewitt et al., 2018).

Davis and colleagues (2017) discuss the critical possibilities that result from reflexive interactions between children and academics, and how methodological and practical ideas from emancipatory research can shape our roles in researching childhood and dis/ability. Reflexivity and power re-negotiations, as well as critical reflections on the pervasive reality of discourses of difference, can lead to a more active approach to researchers' responsibility to disrupt persistent divisions and images of dependence and ableism in research (Shakespeare, 1996; Ferri and Connor, 2014; Mladenov, 2016).

An ethical and malleable approach to research positionality and children's ability to uncover issues of identity, agency and social participation, can also be critical in producing a more authentic reading of children's roles in society.

Equally, by reducing preconceived binary distinctions of able/disabled childhoods, there is scope to explore more complex, rich and dynamic understandings of

children's views (Roberts, 2017). Issues that are explored successfully and 'naturally' in childhood studies, such as belonging, agency, civic participation, gender, race and identity (Connolly, 2017; Corsaro, 2018; Flewitt et al., 2018) can thus be appropriated in the study of children's experiences previously or rhetorically positioned in studies on dis/ability.

The rhetoric of childhood distinctions produced and emphasised by methodological and academic disciplinary borders, can exclude some children from entering 'mainstream conversations' (Goeke and Kubanski, 2012; Ferri and Connor, 2014; Rosen and Twamley, 2018). Children's experiences of social and cultural phenomena, characteristic of their lives and identities, thus are overlooked, withdrawn or conveyed by "proxies such as parents or professionals" (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014: 401; Hartas, 2008; Kellett, 2010; Spyrou, 2011). I suggest that research conventions traditionally promoted in childhood studies are not to be considered methodologically different, challenging or distant, but rather integral and necessary in researching the experiences of all children.

Reflections on methodological exclusions can expose the unconscious hierarchy between childhoods and highlight researchers' own ability to engage with participants (Rabiee et al., 2005; Davis et al., 2017). Moreover, the reliance on adults' competence, posturing and understanding, potentially marginalises individuals whose experiences are likely to be lost in the process (Priestley, 1998; Watson and Shakespeare, 1998; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). Researching with children, in social fields in which similar forms of exclusion exist, calls for a critical awareness of the structures of distinction that can systematically foreclose children's

agency and capability in their everyday lives (Davis and Watson, 2002; Mathew et al., 2010; Tisdall, 2012; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Davis et al., 2017).

Such awareness requires bona fide commitment to young people, regardless of whether their views concord with the adult-defined frameworks that dominate research and policy development with respect to young people.

(Dadich, 2010: 111)

This is especially true for children positioned on the margins through a medicalised reading of their abilities, affecting access to participation through processes often enacted (by adults) according to “conventional social systems” that “disengage (and maintain the disengagement of) these individuals” (*ibid*, 2010: 105-106). A critical understanding of these processes can challenge assumptions that have a divisive effect on participation in research, as well as civic life.

Research as a site for invigorating children’s agency can draw together issues of collaborative social responsibility and action. Moral and methodological consciousness can produce meaningful participation and redress the ramifications of research.

In this process of reflection and realignment of research habits, it is critical to acknowledge that children’s lives and experiences are embedded in the socio-political fabric that shapes their evolving identities and the conduct of scholarly activity (Goodley et al., 2016; Connolly, 2017). Binary distinctions between able and dis/abled childhoods, in social spheres, can be replicated in the way research is enacted and disseminated, often excluding children with dis/abilities from having an active role as rightful members of the ‘childhood’ agenda (Townsend, 2011). Thus, by studying the dislocation of children in the literature, it is possible to challenge the symbolic and methodological segregation, bound in the habitual reproduction of

distinctions, affecting children's appropriation of an equal role in research and in society (Alderson, 2015; Davis et al., 2017). These habits are implicated in the differential opportunities available to children in, and through, research participation and representation.

Blurring scholarly boundaries and re-presenting children's identities in research through apposite research relations can enable "not only a right in itself but also a vital means to the realisation of children's other rights" (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014: 402).

Re-presenting identities

Exploring children's identities by offering experiential participation that recognises capability can reframe the habits that group children according to structured discourses, prevailing in different social fields including education and research, through which children are sifted, lost and homogenised or censured (Rix et al., 2010; Abbott, 2013; Davis et al., 2017). Children's identities are "internalised in personal self-identification and, as such, are subject to change, redefinition and contestation" (Culley, 2010: 208). Identities generated through ethical participation, with spontaneity and freedom, can produce "more expansive forms of citizenship" and agency, extending what previous studies have endorsed (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2018: 232).

This type of participatory commitment has the potential to expose details of the internalised and explicit forms of self that may challenge stereotypes and contradict "popular images of disabled childhoods" (Runswick-Cole et al., 2018: 1; Milton 2012). "Differences between disabled people - differences of opinion as well as

impairment - within their common identity” (Wilkinson, 2009: 98) can be re-imagined, facilitating the emergence of a “self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” determined by participants (Marcia, 1980: 159; Wickenden, 2011).

Limiting assumptions around children’s capabilities are an intrusion in research, pre-determining questions and interactions legitimised by hegemonic discourse (Gramsci, 1992; Meekosha, 2011). Furthermore, research with children can be presented as inherently affirmative, and in the case of researching with children with dis/abilities potentially challenging (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Rice, 2010; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). These presuppositions make research with children divisive and assign identities and dis/abilities to the confinement of a ‘minority’ discourse (Rice, 2010). Exploring alternative possibilities for self-presentation endorses the premise that sees children as capable without exceptions, and recognises the wholeness of human nature.

The challenge is to disrupt discourses that naturalise social order and produce omissions, exclusions and inequalities, to ensure that habitual educational and social practices are not replicated in research and reductive dissemination outputs. Qualitative methodologies, as forms of activism, will otherwise continue to propagate political and procedural resistances around validity, integrity and subjectivity. The possibility of a civic epistemology, one that advances the recognition of children’s agency and self-presentation, interrupts structural discursive interference by raising the consciousness of participants and researchers alike; thus encouraging interactions and explorations that are sustained through an unrestricted dialogue.

Bourdieu and Gramsci

The use of Bourdieu and Gramsci's theories in tandem invites a deeper understanding of social processes that manifest as exclusions and distinctions, assigning privileged authority to an elite group of social actors. It is worth noting that these social theories have been used extensively and with specific *foci* in research involving different social groups and phenomena. The ideas drawn from Gramsci and Bourdieu in this thesis relate specifically to the study of structures and distinctions, to dissect the persistence of habit, questioning positions and assumptions, and turning the focus on human dignity. The theoretical originality of the approach to Gramsci *with* Bourdieu is philosophical and conceptual. Putting aside 'grand' interpretations of Gramsci, that overly politicize his theory rather than attributing sociological gravitas to his work, it is important to recognise his biography as a thinker of geo-cultural marginalisation who embodies dis/ability and confinement. Bourdieu's social theory makes it possible to 'classify' the distinctions that are visible in Gramsci's reading of the reproduction of inequalities in social and educational spaces. Moreover, Bourdieu's social theory aids the structuring of the thematic analysis to produce a topical framework, with Bourdieu's social taxonomy (so to speak) and Gramsci's interpretation of social and historical situatedness in individual and collective experience. This framework offers a way of understanding participation and the products of engagement, to create new formulations of knowledge production that contrast practices and narratives that foreclose agency. Gramsci provides the stimulus to understand inequality as an accumulation of contextual and historical conditionings in local discourse and the wider sphere of social and political ideology.

3.3 Hegemony, consciousness and distinctions in education and research

Education and research discourse appear to be characterised by conflicting dichotomies, representing childhood and (childhood) dis/ability on parallel paths that rarely intersect (Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2013; Goodley et al., 2016; Curran, Sayers and Percy-Smith, 2018). These dichotomies appear to be crystallised in the persistent models of socio-political provenance that are expressive of the hegemonic rhetoric to which researchers often subscribe uncritically. Attending to recognition and problematizing marginalisation is essential to avoid “reinscribing rather than challenging hegemonic relations” and representations (Tsolidis, 2008: 278). These considerations coincide with a “paradoxical historical moment” in academia (Amsler, 2011: 47). A moment in which research appears to oscillate between tentative approaches towards social action, which are born out of an apparent “depoliticisation” and “decomposition of collectivity” (Motta, 2013: 80), and a desire to re-engage with critical/radical pedagogy that recognises the inherently political nature of research and education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Gramsci, 1992). I argue that social change can occur in a dialogic research endeavour, by ‘inhabiting’ a “transgressive space of possibility” (Motta, 2013: 80), that reduces the distinctions reproduced in methodological discourse (Goeke and Kubanski, 2012).

Childhood sociology and critical pedagogy offer useful tools to focus on children’s recognition through participation (Corsaro, 2018; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018). A critical and sociological reading of recognition is relevant (and in my view necessary), in research with children. Fraser’s (1995) notion of recognition places emphasis on the fair distribution of resources; a concept compatible with the ethical, material and dialogic qualities of a critical research approach. Fraser’s *recognition*,

like Bourdieu's *habitus*, is activated when children are involved in research as capable social agents (Hendrick, 2008; Smith, 2011; Moran-Ellis, 2013; Christensen and James, 2017).

Further, recognition of agency in the ways children choose to represent their experiences is essential in mobilising children's views, their values and standpoints; and in troubling the presupposition that research *with* children is inherently participatory or empowering (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018).

Methodological reflexivity can reposition expertise and agentic authority, reviewing researcher privilege through a sociological lens to produce a relational research process in which "cultural authority is negotiated and contested" (Fraser, 1992: 179). Gramsci (1992) and Bourdieu (2005a) provide ways to contest representational discourses of privilege and minority, in research, and commit to "a salutary check on the majoritarian and universalizing tendencies of the knowledge economy" (Mukherjee, 2014²). The proliferation of common sense and the persistence of divisive narratives in research are products of hegemony, "the intersection of power, inequality, and discourse" (Fraser, 1992: 179). Gramsci's hegemony represents the "fund of self-evident descriptions of social reality" that germinate in research and thus often remain unquestioned (*ibid*). Hegemony "expresses the advantaged position of dominant social groups" (Fraser, 1992: 179), and the prevailing narratives and literacies that can determine the social status of children in research.

Reflexivity in research can develop into methodological relations in which "the most central feature must be the role of human agency" (Allman, 1988: 85). This ambition

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can be realised by offering participants the tools and contextual conditions to restore one's social and material status through self-realisation, contrasting the insistence on partial depictions of real life that "is one of the very powerful ways" through which divisive ideology propagates (Allman, 1988: 87).

Gramsci's notion of hegemony is useful in a thematic analysis of ideology in research. It stimulates attentiveness towards the inscriptions of power inherent in research methods and dissemination that produce reductive identities, perceived as universal collective truths (Jubas, 2010). Hegemonic methodologies gather consensus and maintain the *status quo*, producing power relations and distinctions that become legitimised as *doxa*, or common sense (Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 2010). Common sense ideas (or ideals) about ability, capability and agency become the currency that determines the way research is conducted.

To transform common sense conventions, Gramsci suggests a moral and intellectual strategy of engagement and consciousness. This entails embodying an enabling role posited by the researcher (an intellectual) to create reciprocal and accessible dialogues with participants (also intellectuals), based on parity, respect and fluidity, in which interlocutors can learn from each other (Gramsci, 1992). Similar to Freire's 'dialogue' (2018) these conditions can help recognise and subvert the existing expressive constraints driven by power and subordination; this way research can be a 'humanizing' act, an exchange with transformational promise for participants and for researchers (Garland-Thomson, 2012).

Consciousness of this potential between social actors, equally intellectual, capable agents, can render the research activity (with children) critical, transformative and productive. Reading Gramsci as a 'methodological theorist', as suggested by Jubas

(2010), emphasises the advantages of a relational activity to interrogate dominant ideologies. This view of methodology as social action triggers a twofold task, as conceived by Allman.

One aspect of the task is the development of a mode of thinking and the other aspect involves countering the expression of ideology in our material relations and practices by transforming those relations and practices. This twofold task or strategy is also Gramsci's major contribution to an educational approach.

(Allman, 1988: 103)

An interdisciplinary reading of Gramsci's views on power and subalternity is valuable in analysing the distinctions that are produced and enacted in research and education (Buttigieg, 2002). Gramsci (1992) sees the social rules perpetuated by the educational establishment as indiscernible from individuals' formulation of self. Moreover, Gramsci invites caution around an education system that claims to be democratic "while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them" (Gramsci, 1992: 40). This statement is critical in a study on children's identities and can be used to interrogate research practices that define children's capacity to participate according to preconceived ideals based on ability and dichotomies of difference. In an example tied to geo-political situality, Twum-Danso Imoh and colleagues (2019) encourage the study of children's lives beyond binary contentions, while respecting local subjectivities. They note that the "bulk of the literature" maintains divisive binaries, reducing the possibility to embrace multiple narratives and contributing to "the 'othering' of a particular population of children and, indeed, their families" (*ibid*, 2019: 1-2). Similarly, Gramsci's reflections on binary distinctions between north and south, the city and the country,

factory workers and poor peasants, originate in his own geo-political struggles (Gramsci, 1919).

As a Sardinian intellectual located in the South of Europe, Gramsci's "meridionalismo" and his understanding of subalternity as a concept that intersects nation, class, and race, continue to offer productive lines of enquiry for postcolonial scholars.

(Srivastava and Bhattacharya, 2012: 1)

The persistence of subalternity in Gramsci's work "is discussed primarily as social theory, and is much less prominent in discussions of research methodology"; however, the contributions of the "epistemological and methodological implications" of his works are worthy of further exploration, in research that is enmeshed in divisive binaries (Jubas, 2010: 225; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019).

Bourdieu, research and cultural reproduction

Bourdieu's habitus and doxa (2005a) extend Gramsci's views of subalternity, common sense and hegemony. "Educationalists have been drawn to the writings of Bourdieu because much of his empirical work focuses on the role of education in generating and reproducing social divisions" that perpetuate systemic inequalities and appear to remain unquestioned (Painter, 2000: 240).

A critical awareness of social distinctions, associated with methodological practices based on ability rhetoric and unequal opportunities, provides important cues to facilitate ethical research that involves the nuanced experiences that children choose to explore. Bourdieu and Gramsci provide useful viewpoints from which to interrogate the participatory process, its rhetoric, and its political and social implications.

Bourdieu's writings on cultural norms and reproduction can help to unpack the ways that academic work situates and represents some individuals while favouring the narratives and literacies of privileged groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 2005a, 2010). These dispositions appear to determine who is more or less 'suited' to take part in research and are regulated by a deceptive (methodological/practical) "objectivity provided by consensus" (Bourdieu, 2005a: 58). In similar ways, schools can be seen to orchestrate distinctions and differential opportunities to participate through the structures operating within them (Abrahams, 2016).

The impact of these structures on children's development of agency and "their conception of themselves as pupils, and the attributions they create for explaining success and failure" (Sylva, 1994: 135) have been studied extensively, from Montessori (1938) through to contemporary research (e.g. Baraldi, 2008; Ballet, Biggeri and Comim, 2011; Sarojini Hart and Brando, 2018). These studies offer critical evaluations of the part that adults play in enabling or forestalling children's ability to express their views and individuality. Recommendations from these sources can help to ensure that all children have opportunities to exercise the right to participate meaningfully by exploring their perspectives on matters which affect their lives (Alderson, 2010). In actively engaging with these possibilities, children can be involved in research as independent thinkers (and makers) and active agents in their own right (Thomas, 2017).

Differences in children's independence and autonomous participation, endorsed in schools when children are described through their diagnosis, produce assumptions that influence the ways children's cognitive and social skills are understood, and

demand moral re-consideration. In school and in research relations alike, there is a propensity for rationing agency (seen as a privilege rather than a right), thus important perceptions, interpretations and views are often prevented from ‘entering the space’ of knowledge production. These dangerous omissions may further distort our capability to understand and respect children as agents of change in their social field (Percy-Smith and Burns, 2013; Corsaro, 2018; Curran et al., 2018; Percy-Smith, 2018).

Nind and Vinha (2012) suggest designing research that evokes “maximum dialogue”, enhancing the collaborative opportunities for multiple and diverse inputs from ‘participant-researchers’ (*ibid*, 2012: 21). Hollomotz (2018) reviews both the role of the researcher and the advantages of inclusive attitudes in research interactions. Hollomotz emphasises that researchers’ own disposition to difference can provoke dehumanising violence in the research interactions and in the processing of data. Hollomotz notes, for example, that when participants’ communication preferences are not considered in depth, the “interviewer’s actions may contribute to errors, which have previously been described in individualising terms as acquiescence, recency and unresponsiveness.” (*ibid*, 2018: 153).

Researchers working with children identified by their dis/ability or diagnosis may (also) continue to underestimate the communicative capacity of spontaneity (Wood, 2014). In such cases, research can be driven by an evaluative focus, around the quality and accessibility of services, for example, and discourses of ability and difference (Kelly, 2005; Ellis, 2017). Such discourses endorse the developmental concept of children as “becomings”, a notion that childhood scholars are continuing to oppose (Mason, 2005: 92; Christensen and James, 2017; Corsaro, 2018).

The engagement of children labelled by a diagnosis appears to be hindered further by the discourse of ‘becoming’ as being either unattainable or in competition with the present (Rix, 2006; Rice, 2010). Moreover, medicalised interpretations, drawn from a divisive social discourse, lead researchers’ inclination to “have this as their starting point” (Connolly, 2017: 105), acting on predetermined ideas about the identities and abilities of children/participants prior to entering the field of research.

Entry points for ethical participation and representation

Ethical processes for researching with children are steadily developing; and children are increasingly involved in collaborating in research and contributing their unique perspectives, but like other communities they are still “poorly served by some of social science’s traditional research methods” (Roberts, 2017: 147; Bourke et al., 2017). Methods designed for children with dis/abilities can reflect instructive principles that derive from habit and conventional assessment and observational protocols (Alderson, 1995, 2017; Thomas, 2017). These conventions limit researchers’ opportunities to observe and understand personal experiences and importantly children’s own priorities, and have a variable impact on the lives of the individuals who choose to take part (Alderson, 1995; Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

Researchers can be tempted to use methods that mimic teacher-led practices and tasks to elicit children’s views (see Punch, 2002 and Ellis, 2017), “expressly taking advantage of children’s schooled docility” which is “somewhat at odds with claims that such activities promote children’s participation on the basis of active, informed decisions” (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 506). A critical dialogic stance that

engages children's freedom to articulate their views must prevail, to enable spontaneous interventions with tactile and literal materials.

Adapting the research space to accommodate expressive freedom is "central to the concept of human dignity" (Martinez, 2016: ix) and provides the observer with the privilege and opportunity to study visible and contextual realisations of self. An understanding of relationality, freedom and quality in participation is essential, and perhaps best illustrated through the principles of the capability approach (Sen, 1992). The approach emphasises the value of egalitarian participatory practices, as well as play and imagination (Nussbaum, 2000), in the promotion and expansion of those fundamental functionings that are "prerequisites for an equal participation in society" (Terzi, 2007: 759). An adaptive research strategy is aptly informed by these principles, thus valuing an inclusive and ethical approach to diversity and agency (Sen, 1992; Walker, 2009; Terzi, 2013; Nind, 2014) and, as discussed in Chapter 2, can be enhanced by multimodality and artistic freedom. The significance of interdisciplinary work is activated in dialogue with participants, producing new avenues and questions that require further investigation (Walford, 2008). This way as the research develops into situated action, adjustments to the practical approaches and methods are valid and necessary, providing ongoing evaluative opportunities for maintaining reflexivity, quality, and the cultural relativity a project of this type requires. An inclusive multimethod approach values children's independence and competency and involves a variety of visual, experiential and vocal representational and agentic possibilities.

The literature on children's capability to participate in research about their situated experiences allows further conditional requirements to emerge with greater

consciousness (Alderson, 1995, 2017; Thomson and Hall, 2008; Thomas, 2017). A “culture of participation” drives the need to recognise and problematize the potential misconceptions of children’s authentic contribution to research, inviting reflections on the formal and directed processes that “inhibit children’s organic participation” (Malone and Hartung, 2010: 24). An apposite research model can develop both consciousness and expressive expertise in children and adults and invite unforeseeable participatory discoveries, potentially contesting the social position occupied by participants through *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2005a; Cockburn, 2005; Thomas, 2007; Bae, 2009; Nolas, 2011).

In this study, my emphasis is on rendering the capability approach relevant to the methods and interactions with participants, to study children’s identity formation, attending to situated personal priorities often overlooked in ‘specialised’ epistemologies and research (Grech, 2013). This premise applies to recruitment, participation within the study sites, and the production of a dialogic space that respects and engages individual epistemologies and capacities (Manfred and Saadi, 2010).

For this purpose it is necessary to contest methodological discourses that propagate perceived difficulties around autonomy in research with children (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Devecchi et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2017). Equally, it is necessary to account for the structures that determine the value attributed to children’s capability, agency and ability to contribute to different fields including research (Baraldi and Iervese, 2014). Children’s capability is one of the central threads of this study.

Children are involved as capable social agents, entitled to convey their experiences in dialogic opportunities that challenge the confinement of situated power relations in

the context of their realities (Gigengack, 2008). This approach demands reflexivity and adaptability, the scope is “not to consider children as fulfilling orders and expectations imposed on them by adults, but to understand and respect them as independently acting participants with their own rights” (Manfred and Saadi, 2010:152).

The next sections consider how different ways of researching with children, ‘hearing and seeing them’, fostering aesthetic agency can support reimagining participation.

3.4 Listening with the eye³: enabling ethical aesthetic recognition

Les Back (2007) begins his chapter by posing an important question that prompts a redress of the power relations invested in representation and interpretation, and a review of their ethical implications in research. Back asks,

When we listen to people, do they give us their stories or do we steal them?

(ibid, 2007: 97)

The question brings forth important ethical considerations on the potential subordination of participants, determined by the position of the researcher/observer, and the acquisition or appropriation of knowledge that arises in the research encounter. This question stimulates attentiveness towards researchers’ privilege and intention and, in particular, the role of adults in research with children.

Research that builds on adult-led presuppositions risks the exclusion of morality and subjectivity in the representation of children’s views, and should be questioned (Alderson, 2017). I argue that focusing on autonomy, and how it can facilitate ‘knowledge production’, constructs a better position from which participants can

³ Back (2007: 97)

engage in re-presenting their experiences in ways that are both subjective and partial. Witnessing, recognising and respecting participants' exploration and interpretation of experience, in multimodal forms (visual, embodied, vocal, etc.), can disrupt common sense in research discourse.

The tension between recognising the familiar in order to confirm what we already know and listening for the unfamiliar that disrupts what we already know is at the heart of contemporary theories of recognition.

(Oliver, 2001: 2)

The construction of an environment that enables recognition is critical in understanding and transforming the relational character of any research encounter. Particularly one that aims to resist preconceived conceptions of difference, which reside in the social conventions and language that permeate research. This means countering dichotomies of power that position researchers in a customary role of privileged observation and participants as *other* (Bhabha, 1994; MacLure, 2003); moreover, seeing "other people as objects or the other denies them the sovereignty and agency of subjectivity" (Oliver, 2001: 3), it is counterproductive and unethical.

The relational and material qualities of the research encounter, together with a commitment to recognition and the multiple meanings it can elicit, are necessary in establishing a context in which researchers 'hear' children's views (Roberts, 2017). Participating and hearing demand a paritarian approach to occupying the research space, to enable the research dialogue in ethical terms, by "integrating the salient aspects of listening (knowledge through self-disclosure, interdependence, trust, reciprocated commitment, and communication)" (Borisoff and Hahn, 1992: 1). Importantly the ethical intentions involved in this type of reciprocal commitment reflect recognition, and invite multiple and autonomous forms of self-expression.

This approach is invested in the critical scope of minimising the influence of discursive habits that have determined the ways in which adults act, listen and react to children's self-expression (in research and beyond). It offers a critical and ethical route to contesting these habits, which are a "product of cultural expectations" (*ibid*, 1992: 1). Designing a multimodal research methodology contributes, at least in part, to establishing a space for contesting those 'cultural expectations' through knowledge production in which listening and creative partnerships are formed.

Causing disruptions through aesthetic representation

While this project includes verbal narratives and commentaries, for the purpose of the present discussion I will focus on the aesthetic potential of visual and embodied expression, for the exploration of children's interpretations of identity and social life. I argue that aesthetic potential can cause helpful disruptions, prompting a discussion on issues of participation and authenticity in research with children. The aesthetic quality of children's narratives together with their symbolic and agentic value, as well as tactile and material characteristics, can offer new avenues that intersect intellectual discourse with intimate and subjective experiences of identity, participation and resistance (Pahl, 2014). Aesthetic outputs offer vehicles for relationality in the production of meaning, intentionality, agency and consent, and opportunities to look at oneself differently (Pignatelli, 1998; Holmes, 2013). Participants this way can be ethically, materially and symbolically engaged using a variety of languages, which this type of dialogic aesthetic alliance produces; as well as stimulating opportunities for relational interpretations (Pahl, 2014).

The value of aesthetic and cultural participation extends further. To return to Back's question (*are we receiving or stealing people's stories?*), I argue that the act of creating an aesthetic rendition of experience produces articulations of personal understandings in forms that can never be fully translated, intellectualised or paraphrased, therefore protecting a part of their intimate value.

Aesthetic potential

The search for validity in favour of institutional approval (which can regulate funding and resources from particular stakeholders) has been at the source of aiming for 'customary data' in research with children (and adults), with legitimacy tied to defined or unequivocal forms of dissemination directed at specialised academic *arenae*. I argue that a deeper and autonomous engagement of participants in aesthetic research has important potential, not only for self-representation but also in connecting with diverse audiences, in the making of new meaning through propagating dialogue and affective involvement (Saldana, 2003; Barone and Eisner, 2012). Aesthetic participation and dissemination have political and social potential. The aesthetic research encounter invites multimodality in articulating representations of experience, to respond to sociological questions (Eisner, 2002; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Pahl, 2014), "by closely capturing, describing and evoking the social experiences and phenomena that are the focus" of both the methodology and the study (Sikes, 2013: 562). Aesthetic expertise is engaged through subjective and non-directive exchanges that inhabit the creative research space and interactions. The production of visual interpretations of experience can disrupt convention by raising hidden and nuanced meanings, structures and expressions of everyday cultures,

producing new questions, and a potentially more productive engagement of and with children (Bendroth Karlsson, 2011; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2013). Visualising experience offers material representations of tacit knowledge for analysis, permits the involvement of different audiences and expands the conversation initiated in the research field (Garrett and Kerr, 2016).

Moreover, while “visual culture critics” have traditionally “concentrated their energies in critically examining the effects of visual images already out there in the world, already part of visual culture” (Rose, 2016: 16), contemporary social scientists have become progressively interested in making and analysing images in research (Alerby, 2015; Blumenfeld-Jones, 2018; Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2018). There is much to be learnt from both practices, using and ‘reading’ visual, creative and material outcomes, to establish more complex literacies for self-expression, interpretation and civic participation (Prosser and Loxley, 2007; Kearney and Hyle, 2016; Rose, 2016; Dunne et al., 2017). The potential of aesthetic authorship and agency, criticality and creativity in research, suggests that social conditions can be investigated through visualisation and social theory (Pauwels, 2010; Pink, 2009, 2013; Rose, 2016) and equally reframe the perception of how participation is traditionally understood, constructed and disseminated.

My discussion on aesthetic potential was introduced with the purpose of illustrating a view of participation that is dialogic, in which participants - the researcher and the individuals taking part in the dialogue - have mutual and shared respect for each other’s expertise. It is also important to consider the critical role of dissemination, within the same cultural framework (Manfred and Saadi, 2010).

Aesthetic experience through material and dialogic interactions and “in particular, its development into language brings with it both the capacity for rational comprehension and the evolution of a sense of personal identity” (Crowther, 2001: 1). Aesthetic interactions occur in everyday spaces and can be the subject of detailed philosophical investigations (Armstrong, 2000; Crowther, 2001; Pahl, 2014; Herwitz, 2017). Yet, an emphasis on the sociological value of aesthetics in research is lacking the same attention, and this is especially true when children lead artistic production. Visual outcomes are treated as auxiliary devices in research with children, and notions of accuracy, developmental expectations, symbolism and illustration, are tied to representation (quality), limiting the productive and the disruptive essence of artistic expression (Morrell, 2011; Herwitz, 2017). The distribution of aesthetic experiences is consistent with different ‘aesthetic regimes’ (Rancière, 2013), often linked to discussions on elitism or mediocrity in the validation, interpretation or analysis of art. Rancière refers to aesthetics as,

A specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships.

(*ibid*, 2013: 4)

The connection between ‘making and visibility’ accords with a desire to facilitate expressive acts that offer different ways to explore personal interpretations of social and internalised meanings that are autonomous from both adult direction and linguistic privilege (Mazzei, 2007); in dialogue “with the inwardness of the soul into a free harmony” (Hegel, 1975: 156).

Acknowledging children’s creative competencies and applying a capability approach to aesthetic participation and dissemination, can balance positionality and intent in

research (James, 1995; Riddle, 2014; Sarojini Hart et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2017), its accessibility and its multiplicity. The emphasis is on the experiential quality of ‘making’ art and the possibilities determined through expressive freedom, which require a sensitive and affirmative delivery of their concrete form, to give appropriate value to the notion and potential of agency and its affective interpretation.

Rancière (2013), like Gramsci and Bourdieu, reframes participation as a form of civic action, which like “everyday cultural experience is itself aesthetic” (Pahl, 2014: 296). Aesthetic representation in research dissemination thus becomes a cultural site for visibility and civic agency, in images, performance and embodiment (Hallam and Ingold, 2007; Ingold, 2013). The temporality of performance and embodiment can be captured and propelled through different means (i.e. photography, video recording), so that this dimension of visibility too can evoke further emergent experiences and recognition through dissemination. “In an abstract way” all tactile, visual and experiential records of aspirations and consciousness can remain “enclosed in individuality” and therefore preserve the intimate role of the creative process (Hegel, 1975: 156).

3.5 Chapter conclusion

I have argued that the recognition of children’s capability to take part in research has socio-political weight. Aesthetic expression can provide affective experiential means to stimulate a necessary renegotiation of children’s agency in research (first) and consequently in society through re-imaging participation and dissemination.

This chapter has presented some of the conditions that, consistent with common sense, educational (and societal) ideology, can hinder or suppress children’s agency,

knowledges and views in research. The structured and material ‘streamlining’ of research questions and outcomes may - in turn - exclude new questions and perspectives while oversimplifying children’s interpretations of their identities and social roles. These practices may also generate loss of diversity, apathy and disenfranchise new ‘agents’ and audiences from collectively engaging with civic action through research participation (Rowley and Camacho, 2015). Through a critical review of the civic and social role of participation, it is possible to problematize, explore and pursue the activation of agency, capability, autonomy and intent in research. Social theory can contribute to this intention, to unpack the structured ideals that intervene in research participation and knowledge advancement (Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 2005a). Social theory also highlights that the positioning of researchers and participants has socio-political ramifications for those individuals and communities it excludes through concerted distinctions and omissions (Bourdieu, 2005b, 2010; Rice, 2010; Lugg, 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019). As Pinkus explains,

For those concerned with issues of social justice and looking at the workings of power/knowledge, the concept of positioning also opens up the question of how discourses construct what and who is considered as 'other' [...] the defining of one category in positive terms - and the 'other' as what the dominant group is 'not' - and analysing what is not said as much as what is, one can see glimpses of the workings of what Gramsci terms hegemony.

(Pinkus, 1996⁴)

The power of discourse in determining and maintaining divisions through ‘othering’ informs the discussion on the construction of the methodology (in the next chapter)

⁴ Unpaginated

and the role of themes in the analysis, examining the impact of these practices in research and in the social worlds of participants.

This research aims to provide new avenues for re-presentation and participation, by challenging representations resulting from the directive gaze of adults and recruitment practices that privilege didactic and developmental canons (Christensen and James, 2017).

The theoretical underpinnings common to postcolonial scholarship and childhood sociology have previously addressed notions of diversity, exclusion and ‘the colonial stance’ on childhood and dis/ability (Lahman, 2008; Rice, 2010; Alderson, 2015; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019). These disciplines are valuable in exploring the “redundant binary” of abled and dis/abled childhoods in research and academic discourse, across and within different cultural contexts (Wickenden, 2019: 123) and can offer diverse standpoints in the study of children’s identities through a critical interdisciplinary activity.

Defining an epistemological position reflects the reality of being bound by academic discourse and borders that appear to be relied upon as an expression of rigour for conducting research ethically and coherently. I maintain that methodological intentions should be viewed with a margin of flexibility, to foster the practice of a reflexive and evolving activity that ‘mixes’ concepts and methods, crossing disciplinary borders (Nieuwenhuys, 2013) and entering into a formative dialogue with participants. Like disciplinary borderlines, social structures and distinctions permeate research interactions and should be examined (Ferri and Connor, 2014; Rosen and Twamley, 2018), to place subjectivity and reflexivity in dialogue and explore experiences that participants value.

To develop a dialogic research design, I have travelled through what Wolcott calls “a lively market place of ideas” (1992: 5), which triggered reflections that intersect methodological and sociological questions. Moreover, the view of children as active social agents, in (and through) research, is not a novel consideration (Garland-Thomson, 2012). However, a critique of social structures and conditionings in childhood research and dis/ability discourse, merging established academic endeavours, can produce a new standpoint. Researchers can prepare to ‘hear’ richer and more complex perspectives advanced by children (Roberts, 2017), without reducing their manifestation to fit with structural assumptions.

A critical examination of methodological practices of distinction culminates in my aim to offer an original contribution to the study of children’s identities, by combining arts-based methods and thematic analysis, in an ethical and culturally sensitive research design. It is together necessary and motivational to establish an experiential methodology that is attentive to children’s agency and experiences, in a respectful and informed process that challenges inequalities and expands representational literacies and their reach.

Part II Methods and Relationality

Chapter 4

Methodology: enacting research through interdisciplinarity, relationality and a critical analysis of themes and discourse

4.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter, I address the value of a methodology that “exhibits important aesthetic features” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 121) and aims to be productive and ethical in studying the formulation of children’s identities and the extent to which these are shaped by, and responsive to, social and institutional structures. To develop this intention, the methodology privileges autonomy and multimodality, in a research environment that engages children’s knowledges and their agentic and aesthetic representation. The complexity of this task has encouraged deep methodological reflections on different cultures of participation available to children, in research and in education, and a review of the structures and discourses within which agency is encouraged or hindered in fields of intersecting power relations of which research and education are critical examples.

The methodology offers a critical, innovative and disruptive standpoint, to validate diverse and multimodal narratives (Norris, 2011; Nonhoff, 2017), through an epistemology that respects children and involves their agency and capability. This epistemology seeks to engage with children’s own views through dialogic and aesthetic participation, providing visibility for children’s choices and their

experiences of negotiating and engaging with the boundaries of discourse determining distinctions and inequalities.

I address epistemological reflexivity and methodological awareness, to introduce new perspectives and questions on children's participation and representation. Through a thematic analysis of the data, I hope to 're-centre' children's self-representation and knowledges, across and within three sources that include children's creative encounters, unstructured interviews with parents and photo elicitation activities with school practitioners. My approach foregrounds the analysis of discourse and privileged languages (for participation) in research and in education and, as suggested by Fairclough (1992: 2), "presupposes a critical conception of education and schooling" in the reproduction of social conventions (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Bourdieu, 1991; Gramsci, 1992). Importantly, the methodology denotes that children are capable and, like adults, are (can be and should be) involved in the enactment and transformation of social norms (Corsaro, 2018).

The methodology offers the conditions from which participants can contribute to disrupting established discursive presuppositions, reoccurring in research and societal narratives, drawing on their own resources in ways that are personally relevant and significant. As argued by Devecchi and colleagues (2014), it is essential that researchers develop participatory methods that allow the exercise of agency by fostering "the capability to voice what one has reason to value" (*ibid*, 2014: 146). The epistemology reflects my intention to analyse the character of the persistent discursive practices at the intersection of childhood and (notions of) autism, 'common sense' and ableism (Gramsci, 1992; Slater and Chapman, 2018).

The nature of this chapter is together epistemological and practical. The chapter is organised in three parts in which I discuss the processes of planning, reflecting and observing that develop into conscious participating “with and for” the children, parents and school practitioners who have offered their contributions to this project (de Laine, 2000: 16).

Firstly, I introduce the aims of the study, before outlining how a multimodal critical methodology is used. I discuss my epistemology to redress the quality of participation for children in education and research, adapting visual-spatial vocabularies in a collaborative methodology with ideas drawn from arts-based scholarship and critical pedagogy (Montessori, 1989; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015; Freire, 2018). Merging disciplines has resulted in a more authentic involvement of my personal values, which in turn has produced a sustainable partnership with children and adults in the process of participation. The discussion builds on the principles of capability that are relevant to designing a critical methodology that uncovers dominant discourses and intersectionality (Terzi, 2010, 2013; Devecchi et al., 2014; Heeney, 2018; Slater and Chapman, 2018).

Secondly, I present the rationale for using themes and discourse analysis in unison, with an emphasis on the impact of language on children and in research. I draw on the principles of critical discourse analysis as a way of developing coherence between themes and a socially just process of dialogue and action. I introduce the study sites and illustrate the recruitment activities and methods and the material and relational conditions in which these were established.

I outline the philosophy of the methods and the ethical implications of thematic analysis. Throughout the discussion, my approach to autonomy and agency demonstrates the deeply political nature of research and participation.

Thirdly, I explore the theoretical backdrop of the research process. Sociological theorists Gramsci (1992) and Bourdieu (2005a) provide complementary and interconnected points of reference for the analysis of political conventions and social conditions and practices that manifest in discourse, reproducing distinctions and “the interests of the powerful over those of the much less powerful - the marginalized” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 123). While writing at different historical moments and in distinct political contexts, Gramsci and Bourdieu collectively elucidate the role of superstructures (such as education and the academe) in the production and proliferation of processes of distinction, division and exclusion. Importantly, in research - like education and society - these processes determine “what aspects of members’ resources are drawn upon and how” (Fairclough, 1995: 80). I adopt Gramsci’s ‘common sense’ and Bourdieu’s social structuring as theoretical leads in a predominantly visual methodology that develops from a critique of participatory principles that privilege directive forms of knowing, listening and seeing. By adopting flexible, spontaneous and meaningful opportunities for self-presentation, participants are involved as capable social actors, in a collaborative and evolving research process that results in a range of multimodal outputs of sociological significance.

Research Aims

Prior to defining and describing the methodology and data collection processes and the relative environmental conditions in which these have been conducted, I enlist the research aims and subsequent sociological *foci* that collectively have informed and given depth to this investigation. In this study I aim to,

- Explore children's identities by inviting children to participate in spontaneous and autonomous creative encounters that are co-produced, where children have the freedom to choose personal ways to self-identify and generate links with the viewpoints of adults.
- Identify and investigate themes emerging from the creative encounters, in which children's self-identifying choices are enmeshed.
- Examine the relationship that individuals have with their surrounding structures and discourses, to understand how these inform and challenge the way childhood and diversity are presented and represented.

The methodology troubles critical sociological conditionings, to produce an investigation that engages individuals meaningfully in dedicated spaces in which identities can be re-presented focusing on strengths and challenging a prevailing deficit bias (Seligman, 2006; Nicolson, 2015). Thus, unpacking the social structures and deep-rooted discourses of historical and political provenance that affect children's identities, potential and agency, and influence the adults around them (Proshansky and Fabian, 1987; Gagen, 2000; Holt, 2007; Onnis, 2013).

In this process, I explore discourses that are culture bound and nuanced, and characterise social practices that are locality-specific, as well themes that permeate geo-cultural borders.

4.2 Epistemology, reflexivity and dialogue

My epistemology, in this study of identity, develops from an interest in the possibilities of a relational approach to participation, one that assumes the capability of children and the value of exploring multimodal self-presentation that is the outcome of autonomy, agency and choice. Engaging with the literature on critical methodologies has challenged my positioning and revealed the complexities of the social and political nature of research participation with children, and my own reflexivity herein.

The capability approach (as discussed in chapter 3) is the model that promises to engage and develop an appreciation of identity and personal agency most effectively, thus acquiring practical relevance when merged with critical pedagogy and person centred practices in an arts-based methodology. Equally, the capability approach is a means for addressing the persistent and artificial duality in the descriptions of children, which affects participation and agency in education and research (Terzi, 2010). A critical approach to capability raises methodological consciousness in unveiling the linguistic and practical perspectives of those who occupy privileged positions, determining the quality and availability of material and cultural resources for children to participate meaningfully. I argue that this is true of education and research (methodologies) proliferating unhelpful assumptions around children's agency and capability. "These perspectives endorse the use of classificatory systems of disability and special educational needs, which are considered essential for identifying children's needs and for securing appropriate provision" in education (Terzi, 2010: 37), and affect participation in research.

My epistemological position seeks to re-present the composite human nature of children, troubling the reliance on prescriptive qualitative approaches. I argue that in theoretical and practical terms, arts-based methods can offer the means for children to reclaim aspects of their identities from their own viewpoints, representing qualities, knowledges and experiences - of their choice - that encircle their childhood.

Aesthetic and artistic representations and methodologies, while increasingly popular in contemporary research, are frequently influenced by academic demands channelling results into less progressive or provisional forms of data. As argued by Eisner,

Knowledge as process, a temporary state, is scary to many. The concept of alternative forms of data representation presents another image. It is an image that acknowledges the variety of ways through which our experience is coded. It is about the ways in which the transformation of experience from the personal to the public can occur.

(Eisner, 1997: 7)

This debate is amplified in the tendency to exclude forms of self-directed expression from research with children (with a diagnosis); in which directive methods and questions prevail and become methodologically commonsensical (Mathew et al., 2010; Lomax, 2012). Crucially, “a more strategic inclusion of children’s knowledge” can contribute to improvements in research and educational practice (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012: 29). Aesthetic and material products of participation thus become vessels for knowledge sharing and agentic empowerment that take shape in unforeseeable ways.

Through an ongoing reflexive approach to participation, my own position in the field and the analysis of emergent themes become sites in which meaning evolves. The methodology is centred on children’s agency, thus inviting a multiplicity of

manifestations of capability and experience. This philosophy would appear to trigger the challenges typically perceived to characterise research with children, thus potentially foreclosing the opportunity to analyse children's contributions in all their experiential forms and qualities. The potential benefits of eliciting children's direct experience outweigh those challenges (Percy-Smith, 2018). Moreover, I am aware that different responses to capability govern and control the autonomy assigned to individuals in education and research alike, thus "the idea of children's participation brings a practical and political dimension to the idea of agency" (Wyness, 2018: 53). Agency, relationality, and the recognition of diverse capabilities provide the clarity to develop access and quality in a variety of participatory forms. I believe that an attentive epistemology open to children's capabilities can restore meaningfulness in research participation.

Processes in which children experience membership and - in the most successful arrangements - leadership in the production of knowledge, in practical and empirical terms, can be critical in establishing agency and recognition (Belluigi, 2018; Poretti, 2018). This way, research can contribute to eradicating assumptions associated with children's participation, destabilising the canons to which research outcomes appear to conform, and countering the institutionalised models rooted in what Wyness describes as the "normative narrative" (Wyness, 2018: 54).

Participation thus builds on the capability model and, importantly, on a coherent stance that respects the capacity of children's agency to lead the dialogic nature of the research interactions. With this rationale, I have researched the literature that values the processes embedded in critical epistemologies, which reflect my own position within such processes, and focused my attention towards texts that promote the use of

arts-based methods, and qualitative paradigms more generally, to question the quality of participation afforded to children in research. Establishing coherence, trust and a secure context for self-representation is the central purpose of this methodology. Coherence between my educational and pedagogic values and a commitment to fostering autonomy and trust are the principles I have used to develop and maintain a physical and relational context for self-presentation that is adaptable and responsive. The research activity becomes a space in which participation can elicit personal agency and dialogic interaction, born from the esteem of the variety of children's expressive capabilities and strengths. Epistemological coherence is an essential approach to participation that is manifested concurrently in my reflexivity, cultural sensitivity and provision of choice *in situ*, and extends to an ethical analysis of findings into themes. Practical considerations on researcher privilege and positioning merge to develop an interdisciplinary study that combines critical and creative viewpoints to document experience in context, juxtaposing autonomy, capability and agency.

If coherence is a test of truth, there is a direct connection with epistemology, for we have reason to believe many of our beliefs cohere with many others, and in that case we have reason to believe many of our beliefs are true.

(Davidson, 2008: 124)

In his thesis on truth and knowledge, Davidson (2008) highlights the necessity of an understanding of knowledge, and knowledge acquisition, produced by coherence and correspondence between theory, ethics and own beliefs. Developing a conducive research context involves coherence in recognising the interplay between the socio-cultural field, participants and the researcher, and the activation of a co-produced

‘space’ for knowledge exchange to which the research interactions are anchored. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) underline the relevance of the interactive relationship between the researcher, the subject of the investigation and the impact of the context and the situational constraints that are likely to shape a qualitative inquiry. In a relational sense, it is essential to establish trust and an indispensable ethical commitment towards the individuals who choose to take part by conveying their personal stories (Shakespeare, 1996); while creating an interactive relationship that entails permeating communities and everyday practices responsibly, listening to participants aware of the position of power associated with researchers and other social actors in the field.

Recognising the value of establishing trust in the conducive and ethical context surrounding participation, I am aware that parity between adults and children cannot be fabricated and is merely minimised through the co-production of spaces and dialogue. Children are aware that adults fulfil tasks, or have a purpose, that usually originate in choices and actions that are out of children’s control and, in most contexts, the power available to adults to select their roles is likely to be quite different to that available to children (Graue and Walsh, 1998; Thomson and Hall, 2008). In acknowledging this irremovable condition, I make every effort to minimise the impact of my role while observing children’s choices and preferences and respect these as they develop, with a readiness to respond to a variety of interactions and outcomes initiated by children with a conscious attentiveness to overt and subtle requests to involve me in the process.

As discussed in more detail in the methods section, this stance applies not only in relation to children in research but also in relation to the entire enterprise of collecting

and interpreting data. Personal and material expressions of identity and capability build an investigation of the implicit and explicit discourses embedded in participants' views and situated experiences.

Concurrently, aesthetic forms of expression, as data, can attract significant scrutiny regarding the value and validity of their interpretation. I argue that the material and sociological questions that visual and material outcomes pose are important in revising the qualitative paradigm, and renegotiating the power relations that invest the daily practices that children embody. Thematic analysis applied to this type of 'concrete' experiential data can increase our understanding of issues of power in methodological and educational restrictions and discourse, and "accounts for the sociopolitical nature of experience" (Leavy, 2015: 10).

A sociological approach to the methodology is essential. Not only with regard to analysing findings, emerging from the field of study, but importantly in considering the design of methods for recruitment and participation that are sensitive to existing power relations "that impose themselves" on children, and adults, in practices of distinction and marginalisation (Bourdieu, 1985: 724). It is useful to draw on Bourdieusian sociology and lexicon to understand how agency can be dependent on the material properties and conditions of power in the research space and on the positions occupied by social agents in different *fields*, prior to recruitment, influencing the opportunities to contribute to the creation of knowledge. A field is a space of structured positions and power relations that shape participation (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Lahire, 2001; Mayall, 2015; Vuorisalo and Alanen, 2015), and determine access to opportunities to experience self-presentation that are thus

“products of previous symbolic struggles and express the state of the symbolic power relations” that exist in other social fields (Bourdieu, 1985: 727).

My approach to participation and dissemination interrogates “an entrenched ideological stance” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 122) and elicits the use of a tailored sociological language that merges Bourdieu’s notions of field, habitus and doxa (1991) and Gramsci’s perspectives on marginalisation, civic agency and common sense (1992). These aspects of Bourdieu and Gramsci’s theories are used to investigate and contextualise findings and, explicitly, to understand the perpetuation of discourses affecting individuals, their social interactions and the resulting power and agentic distinctions, in different fields. According to Bourdieu, the field is a “site of struggles in which individuals seek to maintain or alter the distribution of the forms of capital specific to it” (Thompson, 1991: 14).

The analytical emphasis is on forms of capital and language that produce and assign specific roles to social actors and define children’s identities in different fields. An arts-based research methodology that recognises these conditions can offer different perspectives and approaches to knowledge production, valuing children’s creative capital and capability through meaningful self-directed participation, addressing persistent power imbalances affecting agency. To examine the social structures implicated in children’s participation and identity formation in context, it is critical to define the fields in which children’s agency is encouraged, conditioned or rejected. In this study, the field is represented respectively by the participating schools, in which (for example) educational policies are interpreted and enacted; the family homes - sites of everyday practices - in which policies may acquire a different connotation, and the creative research space planned in cooperation with children, in

either their home, school, or an arts studio. Diverse definitions of childhood, as a malleable sociological entity, develop at the intersection of different fields and between individuals and society, family and community, local and societal orders of discourse (Fairclough, 1995).

A critical analysis of themes guides the study of distinctions emerging from the discursive interactions that shape children's roles, childhood and identity. As will be discussed later in the thesis, the linguistic choices that are invested in individual and collective practices can reveal social processes, situational distinctiveness and commonalities across sites.

The entitlement to and enactment of 'childhood' is treated as agency, and is examined in the positions that children occupy in different fields and in the research context, in the ways children choose to manifest their expressions of identity. Reclaiming childhood using flexible, open and creative approaches to children's capability can engage more attentively with the links of education and society in identity construction, as well as researcher privilege, personal values and one's own history (Thomson and Hall, 2008; Christensen and James, 2017; Davis et al., 2017). This way I have established my epistemological position to investigate children's identities and surrounding discourses, through spontaneous creative activities and dialogue in which participants embody agency and in which I participate relationally, seeing and listening (with children and adults).

Agency becomes a constituting part of individual identities; it emerges from the activation of diverse capabilities, and is distilled from the cultural and social realities in which everyday practices are embedded. By validating agency, individuals in different fields and cultural contexts can become aware of "their own uniqueness and

similarity to others and of their own strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world” (Marcia, 1980: 159). Fostering individual capabilities, in a multimodal, co-produced, research context encourages individuals to explore their distinctiveness, thus rely less “on external sources to evaluate themselves” (*ibid*). In contrast, it is possible that the way children perform in a creative and protected research setting (in a spontaneous capacity) can be perceived in competition with other tasks, or reframe these in a negative light. Further, unpredicted outcomes that highlight strengths may be seen, by parents and school practitioners, as putting access to support or services at risk (for example) or, to the contrary, invite assertiveness in parents’ disposition to challenge their current status and reclaim their children’s right to individuality in education and other social spheres (see, for example, Abbott, 2013 and Onnis, 2013). The agentic drive attributed to participation as social action could also provoke the circulation of meaningful inclusive practices that support the endorsement of a capability approach in research, education and civic participation (Terzi, 2013). Attentiveness towards the civic potential of participation and the socially engaged values of arts-based research echo the assertive role of critical pedagogy in fostering dialogue. Dialogue, according to Freire and Gramsci, “is the seal of a transformed epistemological relationship” (Allman, 1988: 104). A critical pedagogic approach informed by dialogue focuses on the development of a non-dominant position, crucial for the engagement of children from the inception of the research collaboration, thus maintaining the premise that children are equipped with capability and intent. In line with this pedagogic model, research methods must be open to “a semantics of self-realisation; an idea of children as beings” involved as “active and competent agents” (Mathew et al., 2010: 121).

Such critical reflections on the social value intended for this project have prompted me to address the significance and role of research as the vehicle to re-present children's identities and to explore their experiences of participation and self-presentation. Openness to the ways in which participants communicate their social realities denotes the "reflexive character" of the research activities that are a constituting part, albeit transient, of such realities (Fairclough, 2012: 9). Bourdieu's *field* helps to capture and examine societal interactions and the ways in which individuals relate to the material and dialogic characteristics of their environment (Allman, 1988; Bourdieu, 2005a; Hardy, 2012).

4.3 Visual and textual languages, transient and permanent meanings

Language and creative expression, as tools for self-representation, can manifest one's identity and function in various forms, explicit and tacit, as means for interacting with a particular environment, its conventions and social actors. The analysis of themes (visual and textual) may contribute to a deeper understanding of situated experiences and reveal one's social positioning and the relative faculty to accept or resist the *status quo*.

Specifically, dialogic interactions with participants invite recognition of subjective priorities and reflections on how diagnosis, for example, assigns individuals and their families to a specific social position (Davies, 2018; Watson, 2018). Prior to receiving a diagnosis, children (and parents) occupy an indefinite position; a poignant example of this condition is found in Mansell and Morris (2004), in their survey on parents' reactions to diagnosis. Parents frequently expressed the idea of belonging to "no man's land" before obtaining a diagnosis for their children; and, correspondingly,

were able to move forward from its conception (*ibid*, 2004: 399). Accordingly, a diagnosis may help children and parents stabilise their position within “the general field of which it is a part” (Boyne, 2004: 165; Crane et al., 2015). This prompts attentiveness towards the effects of a diagnosis and the permanence of its meaning or, indeed, its transience in different fields (Bourdieu, 1991).

Through my methodological decisions, I provide a platform for self-representation established by participants, children, parents and professionals, where the meaning assigned to the diagnosis can have a subjective connotation and prevalence in the (self)definition of character and identity.

4.4 The politics of participation

I recognise that social science research as a profoundly political affair has the potential to initiate important conversations and, at its best, drive changes that can improve the circumstances of individuals and communities, at different ranges and levels. However, I argue that the forms of participation available to those invited to share their experiences and expertise may be limited in reality, and involvement in the design of the research activities and analytical processes marginal. Issues such as non-participation and tokenism can characterise the conditions of engagement in research with children, and can be amplified in research with children whose identities are associated with a diagnosis or dis/ability, highlighting a tendency “on the part of adults to underestimate the competence of children” (Hart, 1992: 9; Thomson and Hall, 2008; Davis et al., 2017).

Tokenism is used here to describe those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it.

(Hart, 1992: 9)

Alderson (2001, 2008a, 2017), Davis (2009), Lomax (2012), Pinter et al. (2013), and Christensen and James (2017) encourage the ethical and authentic participation of children in research and this process requires “seeing disabled children as active, creative and productive” (Runswick-Cole, Curran and Liddiard, 2018: xxiii). To achieve these participatory and representational goals it is necessary to deconstruct hierarchal distinctions between adults and children, and between childhoods. Research-born narratives, thus, should be invested in minimising discursive binaries and directional gazes, to capture individual experiences and meanings as these emerge and are validated in a dialogic research process.

The scope of my own participation in this process is to enable children’s self-expression, through reciprocity, shared moments, meaningful silences, consciousness and enthusiasm, and transpose aesthetic and narrative accounts to the analysis, to crystallise validity and advance new knowledge and questions.

4.5 Thematic analysis as a multimodal process: examining sociological trajectories

The method of analysis undertaken in this thesis is thematic, engaging sociological premises and questions, with the purpose of unpacking common and situated experiences emerging from the interactions with participants, their views and subjectivities. While the process may not adhere to traditional dominant approaches, I hope to reflect the ethos of the research by maintaining that classifications and themes are used in ways that are ethical and relational, and not unproblematic. I consider my own discomfort with definite and precise conclusions and the dissection of stories, favouring the use of themes as a structural guide to illustrate experiences in

relation to each other. Similar to Berman (1999), my scope is to enable a common storyline “that grows out of the data itself and represents the character of the data as a whole” (Holliday, 2016: 103). The process used is adapted in line with the multimodality of the data, and can be described as thematic analysis informed and underpinned by aspects of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The multimodal character of the analysis not only returns to the original research aims, but also corresponds to the different points of entry to participants’ knowledges and the ‘points of contact’ of their shared experiences across geo-cultural sites. Meaning is drawn by examining themes that signal distinctions, discomfort and inequality reproduced in social and material practices, structures, language and discourse. It is also important to note that the gathering of ‘experience’ into themes occurred throughout the research process, and my fieldwork notes provided vital leads to my approach to analysing aesthetic and verbatim data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1997; Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). The composite nature of the aesthetic and narrative data requires me to juxtapose findings, in the abstract space of the thesis, combining “descriptions and analysis” and impressions from the field (Honarbin-Holliday, 2005: 64); while concurrently avoiding “essentialist traps”, reducing participants to “cultural stereotypes” (Holliday, 2016: 19). The analysis reflects the transition from interactions in the field to recognising emergent themes that exemplify the discursive nature of the research, participants’ experiences and their articulation in the thesis.

The study of interactions and aesthetic events informs the grouping of experiences into themes, while the principles of CDA provide the theoretical foundations and tools to unveil the details of the linguistic habits and societal conventions that appear to determine how social life is organised. Social theory helps to frame the themes

and solicits an investigation of the realities and orchestrated ideologies that become sites for consent and resistance, through processes that are manifested in language and discursive practices.

A theory of discourse can illuminate how the cultural hegemony of dominant groups in society is secured and contested [...] it can shed light on the prospects for emancipatory social change and political practice.

(Fraser, 1992: 178)

Fraser's view encompasses the values endorsed in this methodology, designed to enable civic participation, dialogue⁵ and social action, to disrupt existing narratives of difference and inequality. Developing themes can contribute a better understanding of the commodification of dichotomies that demarcate unequal social positions, inscribed with discourses of power and marginalisation.

The critical analysis of discourse, within themes, provides the focus to explore the interactivity between social conventions and linguistic practices, to uncover the influence of language on social actors and their representation. Formulated initially by Fairclough (1989), CDA merges functional linguistics and critical social theory, thus supporting the interdisciplinary possibilities and intentions to explore the 'products' of "language, power and ideology", through "textual and social analysis" (Rogers et al., 2016: 1193). Moreover, "the word 'critical' has been central to CDA" supplementing the efforts made in linguistics and discourse analysis with the 'why and how' of discourse (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 5). This combined approach enables the exposure of the ideological potential of 'common sense' to disguise, maintain and perpetuate inequalities (Gramsci, 1992), which are produced and reproduced in

⁵ In the broadest sense of reciprocal and reciprocated attentiveness for one's choice of expression/communication

language use and affect individuals in different social fields (i.e. family, education and research).

Under the label Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) many authors, from various linguistic Discourse Analysis contexts, are working on connections between linguistics and critical analyses of language use, ideologies, and social (de)formations as well as with social science perspectives in more general terms.

(Keller, 2013: 22)

The thematic analysis combines societal structuring with its representation and propagation in linguistic practices (*ibid*, 2013). Importantly, exploring themes as a process through which it is possible to interpret the connections between language use and societal practices (and *vice versa*) has instigated an interest in uncovering methodological habits - perpetuated in the conduct of research with children - that favour particular discourses, methods and proceedings which reinforce existing viewpoints. In line with the methods, informed by critical pedagogy and arts-based research, the analysis encourages a reading of multiple forms of expression for children to explore their agency and adults to take notice of its manifestations. Children's visual and verbal narratives become the instruments to unpack the mechanisms that surround them, and enable a sharper, more attentive, focus on children's perceptions of self and their social agency.

Thematic analysis is the device I have chosen to 'group' and understand the social disparities manifested, negotiated and expressed in visual, verbal and nonverbal forms. Concurrently, CDA, in Fairclough's approach (1989), solicits an in-depth search for the effects of the 'language of difference' on individual and collective identities, to understand and analyse experiences and interactions regulated by social, cultural and political discourses.

4.6 Emergent themes in the study of situated identities

The relevance of using themes in the study of situated experiences is recognised across disciplines, and among scholars in the social sciences, and attests the cultural and linguistic relativity of individual and collective practices (Rogers et al., 2016). The multimodality of the data produced in this study engages such relativity in the analysis of discourse, and aesthetic and textual meaning. Rogers and colleagues (2016) review and define the general characteristics of discourse analysis, foregrounding a common “interest in the properties” of language, as well as “the context of language use” (*ibid*, 2016: 1193). Themes that enable the emergence of diverse facets of personal experience and social practices, are “concerned with various ‘semiotic modalities’ of which language is only one” (Fairclough, 2016: 87), thus aligning with the possibility of analysing aesthetic and material autonomy and agency.

To study critical social factors that affect self-presentation, the analysis includes performed and embodied “action and interaction” and “nonverbal aspects of communication” that formulate identities and inhabit the self (Rogers et al., 2016: 1193). The issue of defining identities is one of the tensions of this study, which leads to problematizing and understanding the social and pedagogic implications of reclaiming childhood from the discourses that reproduce distinctions and inform, challenge and define the social construction of dis/ability. While there are aspects of identity that “might always remain elusive” (Cooper, 2017: 634; Cooley, 1998), the analysis will consider the intersection of sociological discourses that emerge from the visual, aesthetic and literal themes formulated through experiential self-discovery, thus engaging ethically and globally with children’s representational choices.

Identities can stem from one's own realisation of belonging to a perceived group defined by discourses of sameness (i.e. equal struggle, diagnosis or status), produced, perpetuated and legitimised through 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1992). Such discourses potentially restrict views of ability and determine presuppositions on the worthiness of participation and agency in different contexts, including the field of study (Slater and Chapman, 2018). Furthermore, the relevance of context in the analysis underlines the need to recognise variability in child-adult relations in different fields (Mayall, 2015), including the situational and temporal meaning attached to the research activity, involving subjective agentic opportunities (Bourdieu, 1973, 2005a).

The analysis in themes guides the process of uncovering the ways in which individuals internalise subaltern (often debilitating) social positions, through linguistic practices that reproduce "the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys" (Gramsci, 1992: 12), in fields where "individuals and groups become responsible for policing one another's adherence to the status quo" (Donoghue, 2018: 398). The study of common sense and perpetuated collective meanings invites further reflections on "the view that social actors maintain, change, and reproduce the societies in which they live by participating in culturally organised routine practices" (Miller, 1996: 184). My view of meaningful participation determines that research can become an important act of resistance and a civic process of re-presentation for change.

Thematic analysis can offer the necessary guidance to untangle issues of presentation, re-presentation and self-expression, to review the potential barriers to meaningful and accessible participation for children and adults in research and, in so doing,

reverberate questions of social participation in a broader sense. By outlining the rationale for the analysis and interpretation of the multimodal data, and the development and maintenance of a partnership with participants, I reflect on the socio-political contributions of a relational involvement in the study and the study sites. The values and scholarship involved account for the civic role of research and the relevance of participation and dissemination in activating awareness, while underscoring the reality that this view of research entails an ongoing evaluation of its practices in the field and in the analysis. In other words, research is a ‘humble’ process, stimulating questions rather than solutions, through which meaningful participation can propel consciousness, a renewed sense of belonging and a regeneration of self.

With the present study, I aim to uncover societal and educational discourses that affect identities, drawing attention to commonalities that unite experiences from diverse cultural positions. “The analysis of fundamental social problems, such as the discursive reproduction of illegitimate domination” (van Dijk, 2008: 821-822), offers the theoretical and empirical tools to explore the ways identities can be understood as contextual, evolving and in conflict with the language and ideology of ‘able’ and ‘other’ that interfere with (human)being. Aiming to prioritise participation and self-presentation through autonomy, this study contributes to challenging the ways in which marginalised and, often, homogenised populations are treated and represented in research (Shakespeare and Watson, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Goodley, 2017). Maintain a reflexive and rigorous ethical thread throughout the study accounts for cultural characteristics of experience that can stem from institutional ideologies,

internalised ‘common sense’ and historical legacies perpetuating discourses of sameness *versus* diversity.

In this research, a critical study of discourse applies to language, context, and multimodality of expression and representation (O’Halloran, 2005; Wang, 2014). Expression is materialised in the verbal and nonverbal contributions of participants, elicited through creative spontaneous acts, unstructured interviews and photo elicitation. Movement and expression become integral to self-representation, specifically in the creative environment in which the encounters with children occur, and are included in the analytical process as forms of language, meaning and experience, which lead to the trajectory of power structures that determine their form.

It is necessary to note that while this study is vested in educational research (in my own institutional context), I am determined to emphasise the interdisciplinary quality of the methods for participation and analysis. Thus, the language and the intent of other disciplines (namely: critical pedagogy, sociology and arts practice) inform the study of experiences at the intersection of childhood and dis/ability. Like critical discourse analysts, critical pedagogues and arts-based researchers, I recognise that this form of interdisciplinary activity is inherently political and that “power relations are evident in all human activities and artefacts” (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 121).

4.7 Documenting the persistence of ideology

The methodology has developed into an interdisciplinary research design that maintains critical core values and my commitment to these from the outset. My epistemological positioning and reflexivity highlight the potential merits of the research to recognise and honour children’s experiences, routinely embedded in

discourses of power affecting the language and purpose of participation in research and education. For this reason, it has been essential to foster and maintain a non-dominant position in the field and account for researcher privilege in my observations and immersion in the study sites (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). It is also necessary to appreciate, and not just observe, the realities of each context and the practices in which individuals are invested.

The thematic analysis helps to identify shared threads that unite the realities under investigation, these are woven into the fabric of *doxa*, or ‘common sense’, and originate in historical legacies that manifest in current discourses and dispositions (Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 1995/1977). Consequently, a critical investigation of situated experiences can help identify links between seemingly innovative linguistic advancements and the permanence of deep-rooted ideologies (Gramsci, 1992). Identities, thus, become the subject of a dual system of influence; the dichotomy includes reoccurring identifying factors formulated and legitimised by external systems of control (through policy enactment, for example) and established dispositifs of difference that are internalised by persons with dis/abilities in different fields (Onnis, 2013). Gramsci emphasizes that coexisting meanings germinate from the past as “historical residues” which emerge through language, and “are fundamental in operations of power, prestige and hegemony” (Ives, 2004: 88). These seemingly new ideologies are appropriated by social actors and can “vary in their structural determination according to the particular social domain or institutional framework in which they are [*re*]generated” (Fairclough, 1995: 64, addition my own). Bourdieu also considers “social-historical conditions” in the analysis of discourse, in the “production and reception” of individual experiences found, in this case, in the

visual and textual expressions and dispositions of children and adults (Thompson, 1991: 4). Further, focusing on locality-specific details of language reveals links with persisting discourses, as well as attempts to contrast common sense presuppositions in the immediate socio-cultural field and across cultures.

By disentangling participants' views, I explore the breath of discourses that shape children's identities, including local, immediate and contextual events and common sense models of dis/ability reproduced in society, over time. Culture specific representations of ability may concurrently expose differences in the expectations and visibility of children, endorsed by parents and other social actors (teachers, teaching assistants and support teachers) in different geo-cultural settings.

Accordingly, Bourdieu's sociology often consists in questioning, through a thorough historical examination of the constitution of fields, the epistemological and political foundations of taken-for-granted categories and assumptions.

(Poretti, 2018: 115)

It is under the influence of 'taken-for-granted categories and assumptions' that ambiguity is provoked, generating confusion around the designation of ability, which may prejudice opportunities for the individuals defined by such assumptions to access autonomy. Bourdieu's habitus and Gramsci's common sense contribute to my understanding of the contextual and linguistic conventions that define children's identities, encompassing experiences of educational and societal participation and citizenship, that spontaneous self-expression can reveal. The practices invested in different social actors "are determined, namely, by the interplay between their dispositions, or *habitus*, embodied largely during childhood" (Poretti, 2018: 114). The influence of habitus, field and doxa on children's formulation of self and the tacit rules that affect the construction of identity and infiltrate "all subsequent experiences"

(Bourdieu, 2005a: 54) become more significant when fostering first-person narratives in spaces for autonomous self-expression, that are established with participants and protected.

Bourdieu's notions of field, habitus and doxa are the theoretical tools used to capture the relationship between individuals and their social reality, adopting a similar stance to that found in studies of everyday life (see for example, Pink, 2012 and Mason, 2018). Merging Bourdieu and Gramsci's theories influences the literacy of this project and invigorates the critical and sociological efforts of the methodology. Bourdieu's sociology is central in the analysis of the meanings attributed to the interactions between social actors in distinct and co-existing fields, Gramsci's humanistic views engender continuing interest in the importance of 'being' in the process of self-identification, authentication and autonomous self-representation. Through the lens of sociology, collaborative decisions are made and methods developed to explore how everyday practices affect individuals, their identity/ies and agency. The political nature of this research and its practices involve examining the propagation of ideologies in, and beyond, institutional contexts, and the role attributed to schools (and research) in enabling manifestations of *self*.

The exchange between research participation, social action and agency is embodied in the research activities that are concurrently a product of my ethical commitment to participants and openness to multimodality of expression (Fairclough, 2011; Kress, 2011; Rogers, 2011; Mogashoa, 2014). Language-use, the "dispositifs of discourse" and cultural practices around dis/ability are analysed at the intersection between context, positionality, agency and participation (Olssen, 2013: 216; Onnis, 2013). Analysing language enables the recognition of the confinement of occupying a

particular social position assigned and determined by the dominant group and the discourses associated with, what appear to be, insurmountable practices of marginalisation (Gramsci, 1992).

Referencing Gramsci reaffirms the epistemology of my curiosity “not only for knowledge in itself but also for the object of knowledge” (Gramsci, 1992: 418) and the symbolic and ethical “reciprocal relation between intellectual and people-nation” that echoes the civic role of the dialogic research activities herein (Fontana, 2002: 27). The complementarity between social theory and social action augments a deeper understanding of structures and the influence of society-proliferated discourses on individual actors.

The study includes family discourses, proximal to the children involved, which while “substantively bound by local culture” may offer “grounds for resistance” by uniting shared experiences across cultures (Gubrium and Holstein, 1993: 66). Bourdieu’s definition of field is thus utilised across research activities and spaces, integrating contextual and cultural characteristics of participation and my positioning in each locale. Further, the study of context extends to the wider institutional landscape (i.e. education, public health) and how it contributes to the propagation of - what appear to be - legitimate and established linguistic canons. The analysis thus can elucidate how discourses that reproduce dis/ability and othering, determining the exercise or deferral of agency, are appropriated by individuals and become legitimised (Holt, 2007). This methodology provides opportunities to ‘suspend’ dominant discourses that “produce particular social practices and social relations” (Macdonald et al., 2002: 143), in favour of autonomy and agency activated through spontaneous participation and the production of visual and textual accounts of experience. Conceptualising knowledge

as “subjective and multiple” emphasises the sociological impact of dominant discourses, affirming “that a connection between the researcher and marginalized groups yields deeper knowledge” (Jubas, 2010: 227). The analysis examines how language and other expressive devices are implicated in the development of agency, in the research domain as well as in the wider social context in which particular discourses may be inherent.

Fairclough (1995) identifies language as a form of social practice rather than an expression of individual activity or reactivity. As a social device, language can contribute to the circulation of meanings involved in the production and affirmation of disempowering discourses, but can also be instrumental in challenging the perpetuation of conventions that underline difference.

To re-image (participant) visibility in the study of visual and spoken experiences, the investigation recognises communication in all its possible manifestations; through actions, interactions and multimodal expressions that collectively convey meaning and intentionality by using “a different ‘grammar’ than does language alone” (Gee, 2011: xii). Ethically and methodologically, it is necessary to be attentive to the distinct instances in which children and adults convey their experiences in different forms, to explore how language assigns identifying characters to individuals and groups, as well as being a vehicle for agency and othering.

The thematic analysis is built ‘around’ children’s affective experiences of power, displayed in self-representation through language and creative expression, which can expose self-identifying preferences and - for example - the personal significance given to diagnosis in everyday contexts (family, school, and the proximal community) and in the research space. The language used in conveying, as well as

developing and communicating, a diagnosis can also reveal particular sociological intentions; for example the use of a potentially inaccessible phraseology could be representative of specific perceptions of dis/ability determining the distance between understanding diversity, securing individuality, and endorsing a model of participation that initiates and advances capability and agency. Language is implicated in communicating, understanding and pursuing both diagnosis and potential; it is instrumental in collaborative efforts between social agents charged with ensuring that participatory rights and meaningful engagement are respected and enabled in different fields (Bourdieu, 1991; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Alderson, 2015).

4.8 Ethical implications of defining themes

To establish ethical rigour, as well as effectiveness in conveying participants' views, I consider some critical issues associated with the discomfort of categorising human experience into themes and unpicking discursive data from participants' narratives, located in aesthetic and textual representations. As noted by Hammersley (2014), in searching for discursive devices in interviews and interactions, researchers risk omitting (attentiveness towards) individual subjectivities which participants are keen to expose. If methods are used with a focus on discourse, and on 'finding' emerging patterns and themes, understanding the nature of language, its function and how it is employed in and beyond the research encounters could be problematic. Research interactions thus must cohere with the ethos illustrated when obtaining participants' consent and in respect of their expressive intentions (Hammersley, 2014).

To produce a more balanced approach to both data collection and analysis, I argue that, while situated in a thematic framework, participants' experiences, values and viewpoints are conveyed collectively for the purpose of integrating diverse perspectives to critically examine the political rhetoric that 'manages' children's identities, agency and autonomy. "Qualitatively constructed images" and "language-bearing" data, together, "can provide the forms of understanding that researchers seek" (Barone and Eisner, 2012: 159; Roderick, 2018). Moreover, foregrounding aesthetic data can serve as a medium for inviting possible, multiple, interpretations beyond my own; thus, the concurrent analysis of textual data serves to produce a polyhedral account of participation as experience and agency.

These methodological propositions are made possible through the development of a dialogic participatory experience, built on reciprocal trust and a shared interest in the research activity, its realisation and purpose; as well as an appreciation of differential perspectives "discourses and ideologies contending and struggling for dominance" around educational practices, situated identities and enacted ideologies (Wodak, 2001: 11). The emphasis on facilitating dialogic research encourages the formulation of a non-hierarchical stance, co-locating the "analyst" and other social actors in the process of exploring the structures and practices implicated in self-presentation (Stevens, 2011: 183). Recognising experience is also important when considering the biography of the researcher, one's 'self inventory' (in Gramsci's terms), in the recruitment process and gaining entry to the field. Given my professional affiliation with schools, and given schools are central to the participatory interactions, I became aware of adjusting to insider/outsider roles, depending on the reactivity of gatekeepers *in situ*. My awareness of these adjustments helped to "move more fluidly

between the reflection and realism for which reflexivity calls” (Stevens, 2011: 190). Equally, from the outset, parents positioned me, and our activities, as independent from the interactions they were accustomed to with school staff, specifically when expressing their own difficulties with communicating with schools and schooling (Alderson, 2002).

Thus, a necessary degree of sensitivity was lent to the conversations with adults on their own experiences of education that cannot transcend personal values, enacted histories, desires and hopes, likely to inhabit the researcher-participant relationship in the field (Lareau, 1987; Rätty et al., 1996; Gorman, 1998; Rätty and Kasanen, 2013; Pahl, 2016; Löfgren and Löfgren, 2017).

Allied with researcher reflexivity and the exchanges of personal histories is the awareness of the linguistic choices that can perpetuate particular norms produced and reproduced in disciplinary discursive communities, responsible for constructing “particular views of educational phenomena” in adults’ renditions of their own views of education (Rex et al., 1998: 411). A critical analysis of emergent themes requires researchers to be explicit about their “background”, including “the researcher in the findings” (Rogers et al., 2016: 1196), and ‘deconstructive’, in attempting to examine social inequalities that are detected in speech, nonverbal communication and common sense, which participants may together recognise and reject in their development of self-perception and agency in the research interactions.

Luttrell (2000) explains that there are inevitable tensions, qualities and beliefs, that come with reflexivity and these should be identified overtly, making clear that fieldwork is “a series of ongoing realizations that lead to complex choices and decisionmaking” (*ibid*, 2000: 499). Thus, in reviewing the positions occupied by

participants and me, I aim for a more egalitarian sharing of power by including participants' repertoires of experience as well as reflections resulting from the participatory interactions, as these become visible in participants' visual and oral narratives, to examine discourse and social life as inherently interactive (Meyer, 2001; Scollon, 2001; Fairclough, 2016). This aim can only be realised through a 'listening methodology' that is open and sociological in its intent in the field and in reporting findings by adopting a descriptive form that records contextual characteristics, process and agency, and precedes the analysis (Back, 2007; Pahl, 2016). Participants and readers - thus - are encouraged to engage in multiple interpretations of the aesthetic contributions, captured in the form of photographs and images, observations and citations from the field; so that understandings and values can be determined by the possibility of alternative views that can become available in the process of dissemination. The methodology, this way, can "open up a space of exchange and engender a form of reciprocity", a dialogue of multiple meanings and forms of engagement between participants and observers, during and following participation (Back, 2007: 98).

Critical approaches to discourse analysis, illustrated by Gee (2014) and the scholars of the New London Group (1996), Rogers and colleagues (2016) and Fairclough (2016), have informed the design of the thematic framework to examine power and distinctions in social life, of which education and research are necessarily a part (Luke, 1995).

I argue that this critical stance must actively extend to studies, on specific diagnoses, which continue to bypass children's direct testimony of experience, social capability and agency. In so doing, research becomes reductive and generalising, and critical

opportunities to address distinct and complementary perspectives are missed (Valentine, 2011; Watson, 2012; Abbott, 2013; Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018). Academics in the social sciences argue that children are increasingly activated in research through the design of specific participatory methodologies, however as observed by Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) the trend of consulting with children about their life experiences is “rarely extended to those with disabilities” (*ibid*, 2014: 400; Corker and Davis, 2002). Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam also highlight the persistent tensions and traditions tied to perceived methodological problems and competencies, which continue to hinder research activities with children with disabilities: “they are accidentally forgotten, assumed to have nothing to say or perceived to be methodologically difficult to include” (*ibid*, 2014: 400). In such circumstances the risk of social exclusion, which can be an intrinsic aspect of children’s situated experience, extends to the risk of exclusion from research, prolonging the dissemination of adults’ versions of children’s realities (Shakespeare and Watson, 1999; Feldman et al., 2013; Alderson, 2012; Davis et al., 2017; Spyrou, 2019).

Concurrently, I recognise that adult-child power imbalances may continue to pervade how research with children is analysed, written and disseminated, generally amongst adults for adult/academic audiences. A sustainable methodology that includes children’s contributions in accessible formats must be transposed to a range of inclusive outlets for meaningful and collaborative research dissemination. For this purpose, creative activity and artefacts are photographed during each encounter, providing a visual narrative and testimony of participation, preserving outcomes, which may be perishable, and producing a material record for children to keep.

The wealth of findings from research conducted with children encourages the notion that adults can engage with children's capabilities and knowledges, and support a conscious and more effective integration of children's perspectives in the positions of power occupied by adults in various roles (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Harcourt and Einarsdottir, 2011; Christensen and James, 2017). It is necessary to question and supplement the use of traditional or conventional methods so that children can be included more effectively in research that provokes shared interest and relational attention to participation, prompting researchers to exercise a societal responsibility to establish the foundations for evolving methodologies that involve children as capable agents in the construction of new knowledge.

In designing the methodology *in situ*, I problematize the assumptions and challenges of involving participants from the outset, contrasting methodological decisions that occur away from the social actors whose engagement in research is central. These principles align with my commitment to collaborate with participants, to explore their identities and strengthen self-representation through arts-based practices.

Participants, children, parents and school practitioners, were included from the inception of the research project through dialogue, to shape the methods and ensure contextual and personal priorities and strengths could provide alternative ways of knowing and seeing, that often remain unrepresented in research. Moreover, research with children demands an ethical philosophical position grounded in the principles of critical pedagogy and social justice, amplified by the ongoing debate on how to present and include children's views in research about their (own) identities and experiences (Alderson, 2008b; Raburu, 2015; Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018).

This methodology is enacted through a syncretic exchange between my practical epistemology, ethical responsibility and the effectiveness of pedagogic traditions that value the autonomy, perspectives and strengths of individuals. This methodology provides participants with attentiveness, creative freedom and - importantly - the material and relational context to foster self-expression and explore personal agency, experience and identity.

Further, methods designed without the contribution of valuable interactions with participants can exclude individuals (or groups) from becoming meaningfully involved in the research processes, including access to outcomes and findings. Participants can become detached from their contributions, at the core of which reside their willingness to share personal views and an indispensable commitment to the research activities. Moreover, scholars often engage in dissemination practices that subscribe to a purely academic circuit, and the language used to communicate research outcomes is often inaccessible to participants (Chen et al., 2010; Fritz, 2016; Hagan et al., 2017). In these instances, the very nature of the experience of participation can replicate the material and social disparities and discourses that the enterprise of social science research focuses on counteracting (Chatterton et al., 2010; Keifer-Boyd, 2016).

Thus, a critical aspect of this study is the propagation of findings in the field, to revisit self-reflection and participation with children, and promote reflexivity and action from the standpoint of the adults materially implicated in children's socio-cultural development and societal belonging (see, Stirling and Yamada-Rice, 2015; Vogelmann, 2017).

My sociological investment in this project, and the moral, civic and critical values exercised in the field, have benefitted from reading Gramsci (1947, 1992) and Bourdieu (1991, 2010). Establishing a connection with the sociological and methodological contribution of their writings has informed the development of the circumstances in which methods become a vehicle for representation and social activity. In particular, I have constructed my analysis using Bourdieu to represent the structural fabric of society's interactions, to understand roles, representation, individuality, mobility and agency established by, or assigned to, social actors. The search for an effective theoretical and linguistic representation of structures and discourses that characterise experience, emerging from active self-realisation through the possibilities of an aesthetic language, precedes the prospect of a thematic account of findings. For this purpose, I adopt the 'Bourdieuian language' as the register with which to think about and explore the relationship between identities and habitus, field and doxa (Grenfell, 2012).

Bourdieu's approach to language and language use supports a conscious attention towards the interpretation and analysis of linguistic exchanges between "agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies" (Thompson, 1991: 2). This interpretation of the role of language and social practices echoes the approach adopted by social theorists studying linguistic phenomena and provides the template with which I analyse aesthetic and spoken language, activity and intent, in literal and tangible forms.

Bourdieu's *habitus* provides a critical tool to understand the implications of perpetuated practices, propagated through habit and the interpretation of the positions in which individuals are consequently situated and identities are forged.

The term is a very old one, of Aristotelian and scholastic origins, but Bourdieu uses it in a distinctive and quite specific way. The habitus is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any 'rule'.

(Thompson, 1991: 12)

Additionally, the notion of habitus helps to read, decode and socially contextualise the visual expressions of self, as well as the physical interactions with materials that authenticate, endorse and express intent in the space in which artefacts are produced by children and acquire meaning. For Bourdieu “there is an important connection” between the specific position occupied in a social space and the body, its dispositions and actions (Townsend, 2011: 91). It is therefore significant to reference habitus in the critical analysis of embodiment, language and the observation of children’s creative activity, all examples of experiential intentionality.

By implementing Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, I explore the situated appropriation, acceptance and resistance, towards particular practices and norms. Habitus for Bourdieu “is an internalised scheme, which provides us with durable patterns of dispositions, which are deeply inculcated” and are, usually, representative of the positions occupied by individuals, which might be contingent upon the material resources available (Townsend, 2011: 91). Yet, as an “acquired system of generative schemes” habitus enables its actors to be together original in their intent and “mechanical in the reproduction of the original conditionings”, defined by historical and cultural premises (Bourdieu, 2005a: 55).

Bourdieu's way of "rethinking the relation between identity and social structure" is unique in attempting to understand "seemingly spontaneous individual action" and the characterization of individual dispositions that are reflective of society's demands, conveyed through explicit, collective and tacit norms (Elliott, 2014: 166).

Habitus is deeply rooted within our being and this is particularly relevant when investigating matters such as childhood, identity and dis/ability, potential and marginalisation, and the adults' gaze. To contextualise and understand how practices and sites of experience are interlinked, Bourdieu's social theory offers a framework to capture the ways in which context, language use and customs are implicated in an interactive process in the viewpoints of social actors, participating in this study, from their particular positions and fields. This theoretical choice supports the exploration of current social practices and discourses (of identity and difference), as well as historical structures and tacit presuppositions referenced explicitly or covertly by participants. This lead promises to elucidate "how social arrangements materialise over time in specific circumstances, hence illuminating power relations that constitute the very foundations of these arrangements" (Navarro, 2006: 13).

I explore the interactions that occur between individuals and different fields, to uncover how identities are shaped in contexts where personal liberties are enabled or interrupted. This study of identities and situated experiences leads me to tease-out the conventions that influence the realisation of societal and educational inclusion, contributing to children's experiences, and - in turn - reveal common and distinct practices across sites. These conventions can affect children and adults according to identities and positions that are internalised or transgressed, in different fields with distinct agentic possibilities. The various arrangements that constitute habitus reveal

the legitimisation of social ordering and exclusionary practices, accepted “through a natural or common sense classification” (Kitchin, 1998: 351).

The use of themes provides the opportunity to bracket the comparative intentions that frequently characterise educational research conducted in distinct geographical contexts, and to acknowledge the specificities and commonalities in societal discourses, as well as potential differences within countries (Booth and Ainscow, 1998). In this study *habitus* incorporates nationality and situality, and represents the interwoven discourses that contribute to the construction of identities, the formulation of versions of self, and the situated actions of children, parents, school practitioners that contribute to children’s cultures. The observation and interpretation of individual cases in context contribute to the investigation of local practices, and how these define the ways social actors resist and prolong discourses of inclusion/exclusion, marginalisation and dis/ability, in and across cultures.

This linguistic 'sense of place' governs the degree of constraint which a given field will bring to bear on the production of discourse, imposing silence or a hyper-controlled language on some people while allowing others the liberties of a language that is securely established.

(Bourdieu, 1991: 82)

Contextual, linguistic and discursive considerations on the meanings ascribed to place and agency are essential in this study, and in the development of a ‘thematic framework’ that situates the actions of participants and their positions in a social field at the centre of a holistic approach to representation, observation and analysis.

The multimodal research activity has initiated a metaphorical dialogue between my values, pedagogic theories and my professional history, which includes experiences and interactions from my work in schools and the arts (Bernardi, 2019a); it has

sparked a renewed intent to address potential barriers to participation, thus eliciting personal modes of self-representation by collaborating with individuals not previously involved in research.

The methodology is informed by an intellectual history of my epistemology and develops into a purposeful and ethical research environment inhabited and co-produced with children and adults, with the intention of integrating the capabilities and viewpoints of all participants (children, parents and school practitioners). By adopting a functional approach to interpreting experience, and to justify the choice of methodology, I present the ethical and relational conditions of this research and situate each method used in a complex interdisciplinary theoretical fabric.

The methodology therefore is an important subject in the thesis, carrying with it the decisions it poses, the relevance and authenticity of my approach and the conduct of the ethical and collaborative investigation it has produced. An important process for the critical researcher is establishing dialogue as self-reflection and action, in which the task of knowledge production and interpretation is not confined to the role of the ‘analyst’ (Wetherell, 1998; Litosseliti and Sunderland, 2002). Involving a range of social actors, who cohabit different social fields and the research space, is a means of producing and enacting an ethical methodology. Back (2007) illustrates this possibility with a poignant analogy, representing truth (or knowledge production) as a handful of sand.

In a desperate attempt to hold on to these pure grains – and in the intense heat produced by the desire to know and understand – a lens is forged. It is made up equally of the grains of truth that form its elements and the hand that fashions it.

(Back, 2007: 99)

The malleable dimension of this methodology requires me to internalise and inhabit a philosophical position that acknowledges and values local customs, meanings and language use that are culture bound, approaching and exploring common experiences across sites with interest and ethical readiness, while offering the material and agentic tools of relationality and artistic inquiry. The methods become a form of civic action that precedes and anticipates the role of the analysis.

The realities explored in distinct sites demonstrate that both seemingly unique and shared meanings can be replicated beyond geographical boundaries, and require an essential ethical disposition towards fluidity of commonalities and disparities, integral characteristics of a situated investigation.

While the study involves both children's and adults' viewpoints to establish a holistic representation of contextual experiences and societal practices, children's versions of *self* and their personal accounts are given dedicated ethical and methodological attention. Through concrete adaptations derived from children's ideas, preferences and choices, the processes of data collection take shape in practice in the development of purposeful spaces and in the theoretical decisions enacted in the methodology and in the field (see chapter 5 for a discussion on the creative research space).

My methodological priority, therefore, is to de-colonise childhood by facilitating and legitimising a process of autonomous meaning-making. Through creative actions, children can explore and represent their own versions of childhood. Engaging children meaningfully, therefore, constitutes the essential framework of this study. The methodology develops through an evolving and sustained approach to my own ethical reflexivity, for exploring and understanding children's presentation and representation of identity through creative practices, in a protected and apposite space

informed by critical pedagogy and the arts (Montessori, 2004/1950; Foster, 2016; Freire, 2018).

With this in mind, the ethical principles endorsed in this study are continuously re-examined to sustain a dynamic evaluation of the participatory effectiveness of the methods used and my commitment to children's membership in the process of recognising, observing and conveying their experiences.

In particular, the visual participatory methods with children, the production of images and - importantly - their agentic function and the concurrent analysis of responses from parents and school practitioners, reflect and validate the intersection of discourses emerging from different viewpoints and socio-cultural positions, and my own role in accessing powerful subjectivities to initiate an ethical review of the *status quo*.

I have been interested in studies that evaluate the creative conditions where visual expression is treated as language and as such has the potential to produce choice and agency, revealing specific socio-cultural norms (Goodman, 1978; De Certeau, 1984; Mitchell, 2005; Pink, 2012; Brown and Johnson, 2015; Fairclough, 2016). The research space in this philosophy is an attempt to offer a neutral ground, where descriptive, discursive choices are made independently by participants in the exploration of material and relational conditions, in creative actions and aesthetic (multimodal) outputs that manifest experiences of self (and of the research activities), and contribute to reclaiming diverse subjectivities in the process.

My methodological approach considers dialogue and meaningful participation critically, raising questions on language and power in research and inviting greater attention towards individual and collective experiences of self-presentation and re-

presentation, in an effort to develop an actualisation of the correspondence between sustainable participation and social action.

[Children's] interactions with adults, cultures, environment, things, shadows, colours, spaces, times, sounds, smells and tastes, immediately situate them in a world of communication and exchange, from which they take and receive, combining and selecting sensations, emotions, sentiments [...] meanings they gradually learn to distinguish, organise and process.

(Malaguzzi, 1990 in Cagliari et al., 2016)

The agentic role ascribed to children's aesthetic, experiential and sensorial language constitutes a pivotal analytical interest in this study, leading the ongoing sensitive and dialogic correspondence to the ways individuals choose to share and reveal their perspectives in the research activities. These values underpin the ethical commitment to participants at every stage of the research, including analysis and dissemination, validating their civic, political and critical role in the study.

4.9 Entering the field and methods

My cultural, biographical and professional affiliation with both countries aided my field entry (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017); it also helped to initiate the interest of school gatekeepers, namely *dirigenti* in Italy and head teachers in the UK, with whom I met in person to present the study and begin the recruitment activities with their consent. To articulate the nature of the project to gatekeepers in the first instance, and then to potential participants, I produced a leaflet⁶ illustrating the non-prescriptive participatory ethos of the study and my openness to a range of expressive and participatory possibilities. It included the role and age range of participants, a

⁶ See Appendix 1 for the English and Italian editions

summary of my professional experience and values, and how these would inform the research activities. I hoped that examples from my practice would propagate a more practical, dynamic and sincere representation of my role, and a less formal view of research and participation. The leaflet was distributed to class teachers (and SENCOs in the UK), in 4 mainstream primary schools in Central Italy and 5 mainstream primary schools in NW England, then shared with parents of children with a diagnosis of autism. Subsequently, parents interested in contributing to the research project contacted me, and I met with individual families to illustrate the study to children and their parents.

The initial meetings provided an opportunity to present my previous work with children and families (in the UK) and my involvement in the arts. Of the fourteen families that expressed an interest in taking part in the study, all gave their consent and participated in all aspects of the fieldwork as summarised in Table 1.

Central Italy	8 children (6-10 yrs) 8M	11 parents* (6 mothers, 5 fathers) *2 sibling groups	25 school staff: 24F, 1M (8 support teachers, 17 class teachers)
NW England	8 children (6-10 yrs) 2F, 6M	16 parents (8 mothers, 8 fathers)	24 school staff: 23F, 1M (11 teaching assistants, 13 class teachers)

Table 1

After providing their informed consent, children, their parents and school practitioners, established a schedule for their involvement. All field activities were conducted *in situ* in Central Italy (in spring 2017) and in NW England (in autumn

2017), over a ten-week period during which I facilitated three ‘streams’ of data collection (Figure 1), these comprised:

Four creative encounters with individual children,

Three unstructured interviews per family (one interview with mothers, one with fathers and a final interview with either or both parents⁷),

(And) two photo elicitation focus groups with class teams (involved in the education of children-participants) in each school (UK) and school cluster (Italy).

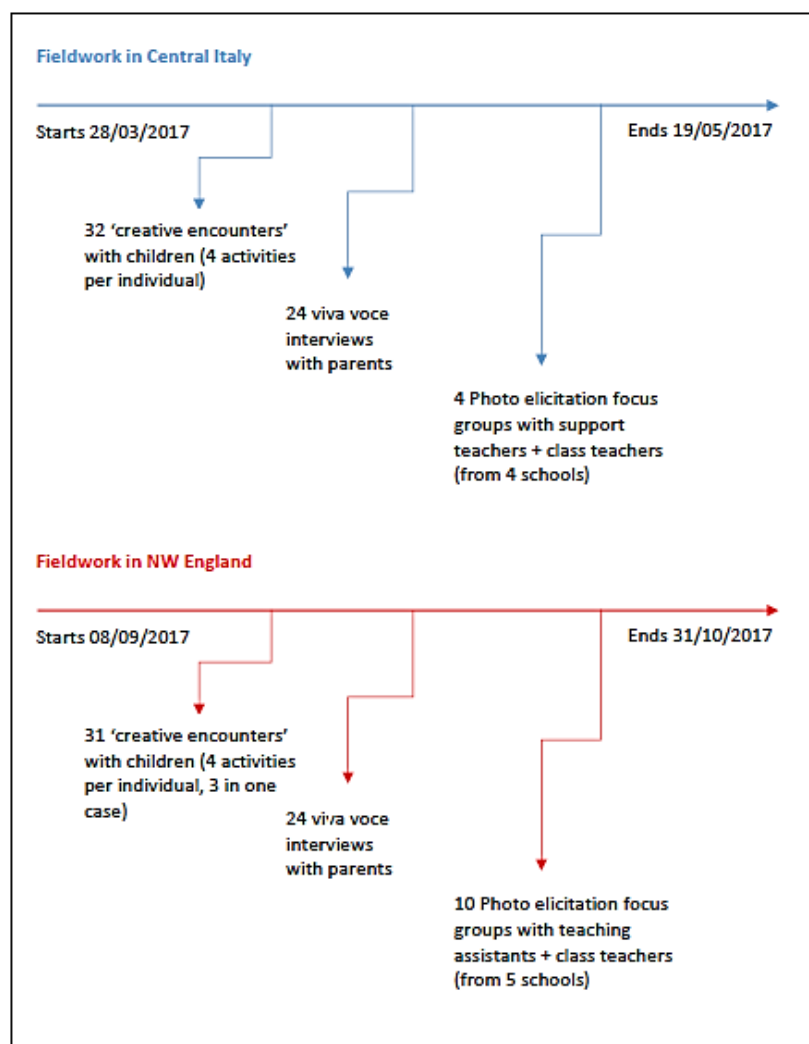


Figure 1. Summary of in-situ fieldwork periods and corresponding data collection activities

⁷ Where applicable

The research activities in Central Italy were carried out in a seaside town with a rich archaeological, historic and linguistic heritage. The town is located 40 minutes away from a large university, which is a popular destination for local students. The town is unequivocally partitioned into districts (*quartieri*) defined by specific socio-economic characteristics, largely reflected in the architectural appearance and maintenance of each area. Children attend the school nearest to the family home; this is a common practice in Italy. This custom determines that children are likely to attend school with peers who share a similar socio-economic status and sense of place, and, often, strong community values. The socio-economic distinctiveness of each district emerges in the experiences and accounts of participants (particularly adult participants) and populates the day-to-day discourses perpetuated throughout the town and its communities.

According to national policy, all schools in the region are grouped into clusters, comprising preschools, primary and secondary schools, managed by a principal called *dirigente*. The schools in this town are divided into three clusters. All three principals/*dirigenti* were contacted during the planning stages of the study, two responded positively to the invitation of engaging in the research and consented to taking part in the study; thus the sample involves eight children attending four mainstream primary schools from two clusters. Both clusters comprise pupils from families that have a medium to low income (the principal that elected not to take part in the study, chairs the cluster that comprises children of families with medium to high income).

The field activities in England were conducted in five mainstream primary schools, with diverse cultural and demographic characteristics, in five locations across the

North West region. The first school, situated in a small market town, is a faith school with a regular intake of pupils from a similar socio-economic background who live in the town or in one of the villages in the surrounding area. The second school is a state school, which performs well and is oversubscribed, located in an impoverished area within a large metropolitan city. Pupils share similar socio-economic backgrounds, comprising children from ethnic minority and traveller communities. The third school is in a city known for its former industrial capital; it is a large faith school with strong connections with the local university, with which it shares pedestrian routes and parts of the grounds. The fourth school is situated in an affluent coastal town; it is a small school and has a good reputation and strong community ethos. The fifth school is located in an affluent area of a town with distinct socio-demographic borderlines; the school is oversubscribed and has a strong influence on the community through after-school programmes and sporting events.

From the outset during the ‘recruitment stage’, clarity in the rendition of the purpose of the study, to interrogate perceptions on children’s identities in research, in school and familial fields, was essential and deterministic in the development of trust between potential participants and me. Consequently, much effort was invested in “the description of the methodology” to explain how methods would be produced collaboratively, and data selected and used (Sriwimon and Zilli, 2017: 137). Moreover, planning the fieldwork activities in dialogue with participants, in their societal context, also helped to establish the ‘ethical symmetry’ necessary in researching with children and within their cultural and familiar environments (Christensen and Prout, 2002).

The introductory activities provided an initial overview of the social merits of purposeful, creative and ethical methods, placing significant attention on the relational quality of the context in which participation would evolve. For example, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, children carried out their activity in either a familiar environment or one meaningfully associated with the creative encounters, prepared according to their requests. Children practised autonomy and control over the time spent on their activity, and had the choice to withdraw or conclude the activity freely at any stage of the creative process (or the fieldwork).

I dedicated special attention to the involvement of children in the choice and layout of materials and in the co-construction of the creative space, to ‘receive’ children’s assent and record their interest in the activities, reflecting individual communicative preferences and strengths. Children gave their assent using written and visual materials and a range of opportunities to ascertain their intentionality, which allowed me to “be reasonably confident” that they had “understood the informing process” and were genuinely interested in taking part (Sargeant and Harcourt, 2012: 75).

Creative Encounters

As will be argued in depth in the next chapter, the authentic engagement of children can be “a catalyst for transformative practices to directly improve their lives” (Malone and Hartung, 2010: 30); this philosophy and the ethical and practical conditions of the creative encounters thus are essential to realising socially engaged meaningful participation.

Participants might act in all sorts of unexpected ways, and (that) no amount of meticulously preplanned and carefully applied technique will alter this. Indeed, to seek to do so would be contrary to the spirit in which ‘participatory methods’ are offered.

(Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008: 503)

The range of possibilities in the research process and the unexpected and unforeseeable contributions from children, establish the originality of the methods, eliciting questions on methodological and social practices, discourses and distinctions.

Facilitating participatory activities in spaces in which “children are the gatekeepers” (Holt, 2004: 19) reduces the power divide between children and adults, participants and researchers, and this “is a significant moral issue” and ethical responsibility for researchers working with children (de Laine, 2000: 16).

Activating and respecting children’s agency in the research space can merge individual circumstances and ‘common sense’ practices that are co-constructed and adhered to, or transgressed, internalised and critiqued by individuals occupying particular social positions. Using material, visual and tangible resources made participation more appealing, thus rejecting the divisive function of spoken language that assumes a hierarchy of participatory validity, reproduced in research “in which children respond to questions posed by an adult researcher” (Mitchell, 2006: 62). Additionally, the location of the activities, a creative space in family homes, schools and an arts studio, determined the value and quality of the research interactions with children (Abbott, 2013; Taylor, 2018).

The creative encounters provided opportunities to observe verbal and non-verbal participation, movement and motivation, as well as, silence and pauses, which can all

“be used as indicators to answer sociologically informed questions” even when these are not presented in conventional form (Emmison et al., 2012: 152), potentially manifesting unexpected truths about the malleability of children’s societal roles. Children’s creative and aesthetic contributions, supplemented by the views of parents and school practitioners, can produce a tapestry of perspectives, which together highlight common themes in the construction of children’s identities, capturing the intersecting discourses that define childhood and dis/ability in different fields.

Unstructured Interviews

The literature proposes a number of forms that the qualitative interview can take; importantly, the ethical implications of conducting unstructured interviews underscore the possibility of multiple responses that this type of interaction can produce and entail (Hammersley, 2014; Pickering and Kara, 2017). Unstructured interviews can demonstrate explicit or involuntary adjustments in language use and choice of register, therefore it is necessary to ‘read’ the use of different communication devices, taking into account the influence of the research context and the broader social field, and “the promissory character” individuals may exhibit in the presence of others (Goffman, 1990: 14). It is important to note that Goffman’s observation is adopted throughout the analysis, to understand and underline different functions and levels of intentionality in adults’ (and children’s) expressions, the challenge is to explore “causal and persistent” practices and the ways in which these evolve into accepted and replicated conventions (Turner, 1994: 38).

Unstructured interviews “can offer new insights with respect to research questions, help researchers understand and interpret interview materials, and highlight ethical

considerations in the research process” (Elwood and Martin, 2000: 649-650), offering a necessary “conceptualisation of power and place” in the research interactivity (*ibid*, 2000: 251). Co-production and a collaborative approach to the research interactions, established in the way interviews evolve dynamically, ensure that sensitive (cultural) adjustments accommodate the needs and values of participants and enhance their opportunity to experience ethical self-representation. Interviews as a mode of data collection and sociological activation are an important vehicle for participant-representation; reflexivity in this process is essential to recognise and examine ideologies, assumptions and common sense that determine what is seen and heard (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012).

The interviews therefore had to provide opportunities for both empathy and neutrality, in the reception of subjective experiences and knowledges, and an overt commitment to participants’ authenticity and willingness to share, often, emotive and self-critical perspectives. The context and practice of interviewing in this way, and the significance of presenting the research goal to “maximise the utility of this method” (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012: 99), enabled a collaborative approach to self-representation and reflection. The development of trust in a safe environment produced a range of exchanges in which participants could choose the terms of my involvement. The interactions progressed naturally with an incremental focus on issues relating to both parenthood and childhood.

Parents had the choice to determine the venue for our meetings, to use visual tools, to produce artefacts (like their children), present photographs or significant items that could aid their narrative or my understanding and interpretation. Only in a couple of cases photographs were shared, as most parents preferred to talk about their

experiences presenting their stories through detailed and often emotive oral narratives. Most parents hosted the interviews in the family home (or in a suitable place chosen by parents) which helped to preserve the wholeness of parents' personhood (Bakhtin, 1993) and minimise the feeling of exposure that may occur in formal or public settings (Talmage, 2012).

During the first interview, mothers and fathers were invited to take part individually; to better understand their roles and perceptions of their child(ren)'s identity from their specific standpoints. Drawing together their distinct perspectives, in the third interview, led to an intersection of understandings of identity, individuality, othering, aspirations and autism. Parents led the focus of the interviews, which provided a greater opportunity for diversity and personal representation; this also enabled the emergence of subjectivities and priorities linked to societal discourses on gendered roles, expectations and norms.

The unstructured character of the interactions meant that the information shared by individual parents varied in depth, in relation to the focus on children's identities; thus, requiring necessary filtering prior to the analysis, "designating certain materials" as less relevant (Talmage, 2012: 301). The interviews provided critical, direct and indirect reference to children's *self* from a parental and societal perspective, resulting from societal discourses assimilated by parents.

To affirm the value of the contributions of individual parents, each interviewee was positioned as an expert in their own field (Ryan and Bernard, 2000), creating a balance between the authentication and representation of personal views and interpretations, and drawing a trajectory linking societal discourses with situated experience. In some cases, the natural disposition to converse more or less openly

about personal views and roles was enhanced by parents' opportunity to be heard (Lomax, 2015). Listening as a vehicle for validating experience is often given a less prominent focus in the literature, on qualitative methods, which instead gives considerable attention to "asking the right question" (Talmage, 2012: 295). Listening to parents attentively involved flexibility of time, respecting narratives as well as pauses and silences. Interviewing mothers and fathers from each family unit, individually and together, also provided parents with the opportunity to share different priorities, motives and perceptions from their unique standpoint, on both their parenting roles and their personal experience of participating in the research activity.

Moreover, research often focuses on mothers (Dale et al., 2006; Wachtel and Carter, 2008; Giallo et al., 2013; Zaidman-Zait et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2016), thus including fathers, as respondents in their own right, can support "family based evaluations of the similarities and differences experienced by mothers and fathers raising the same child with autism" (Kayfitz et al., 2010: 342). One of the few studies on fathers focusses on their opportunity to assert their "own sense of loss" in specific ways, in an effort to come to terms with the "unanticipated demands associated with autistic spectrum disorder" (Cheuk and Lashewicz, 2016: 343). The directive interview, used in Cheuk and Lashewicz's study, risks prolonging a deficit discourse in the process of exploring how parents might adapt to the diagnosis in different ways (Midence and O'Neill, 1999; Allred, 2015; Crane et al., 2015). Discourses, practices and beliefs emerging from unstructured interviews, instead, can play a part in understanding the characteristics intrinsic in parents' quotidian practices of acceptance, acquiescence and resistance (Farrugia, 2009).

Unstructured interviews with mothers and fathers, and the photo elicitation activities with school practitioners, favour the emergence and interpretation of a range of coexisting and interlinked perspectives from the adults that contribute to the social fabric in which all social actors (children and adults) are invested.

Photo Elicitation Focus Groups

Photo elicitation ('PE' hereafter), in focus groups, has the potential to promote multifaceted responses in the research process and stimulate the emergence of qualitatively different information to that obtained in conventional interviews (Rose, 2016). This technique can be an evocative non-textual strategy for inviting contributions from different members in a group, capturing and exploring "the values and emotions of social relations more effectively" (Bignante, 2010: 2). 'PE' minimises, or at best removes, the hierarchical conditions that might characterise the relationship between teachers and teaching assistants or support teachers, constructing a *stimulus* and a platform to share personal observations, ideas and beliefs. Using photographs in focus groups enables a participant-centred approach that can produce reflections on the 'social value' of the role of teachers and teaching assistants/support teachers (Davey, 2013). Sharing photographs, to prompt reflection and dialogue, provides scope for identifying commonalities and differences in values, perspectives and priorities; and how these affect the development of inclusive practices, pedagogies and professional identity, thus underlining the freedom, ability and willingness to adapt to the needs of individual children (Ibrahim, 2012; Woolhouse, 2015; Barberis, Buchowicz and De Luigi, 2016).

In the study of identities, as subjects of differently positioned social gazes, photographs can contribute to participants' recognition and understanding of practices attached to environmental hierarchies, common sense and habit that become naturalised in school and in institutional discourse (Bourdieu, 1991; Gramsci, 1992; Fontana, 2002; Ives, 2004; Meo, 2010).

Facilitating 'PE' focus groups with class teams offered a dialogic setting for the intersection of a network of shared and individual viewpoints, which helped to elucidate how distinctions are accepted, perpetuated, potentially transgressed and challenged in schools. Prompting the intersection of different priorities, in the rendition of socially inclusive practices in school, also underscored links between the ways children self-identify and how adults perceive and construct their own professional identities (Woolhouse, 2015). 'PE' also helped to understand how school practitioners develop their own professional status in relation to organizational cultures, potentially contrasting personal and pedagogic values and consciousness, which in turn produce situated versions of children's identities (Tirri et al., 2013). These practices can demonstrate different ways that societal discourses can permeate interactions and identification habits in schools, in practitioners' attitudes to individuality, capability and difference, and their reflexive role in structuring their participation and that of their pupils.

Photographs in social science research have been used to function in multiple ways, as forms of data as well as records of participation (Rose, 2016). In other instances, the content of photographs has been used to promote reflexivity amongst researchers and participants, to elicit critical readings of images that represent events, places and interactions; offering a springboard for multiple responses and understandings

(Cooper, 2017; Dockett et al., 2017). As a method for eliciting experience, using photographs can produce a number of responses that involve affect and reflection, and reactions to sociological issues that are presented more effectively through visual means (Meo, 2010; Hinthorn, 2012). In this study, the photographs taken in schools⁸ and shared with practitioners in the focus groups, which featured their (own) school setting, contributed to eliciting cultural and linguistic nuances specific to the *locus* in which photographs were presented, inviting participants to reflect on and recognise, implicitly and explicitly, familiar and unexpected practices and habits (Prosser, 1998).

The ‘PE’ focus groups stimulated thinking around the propagation of inclusion/exclusion and autonomy in children’s learning, drawing on both wide-ranging institutional discourse and molecular situated attitudes (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Dunne et al., 2017; Bernardi, 2019a). The analysis of the themes from the ‘PE’, including the contextual dynamics of the interactions between school practitioners, can reveal the ways teachers, teaching assistants and support teachers formulate children’s identities from positions given inherent ‘prestige’ and authoritative status through ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971; Hodkinson, 2011; Ball, 2012; Cain, 2016; Dunne et al., 2017).

Holm (2008) identifies three types of photographs which are traditionally made available to participants in ‘PE’, these are “subject-produced images” (photographs taken by participants), “pre-existing images” (historical and artistic) and “researcher-produced images” in which researchers document places and interactions. The latter, applies to the photographs used in this study; which captured the environmental

⁸ By me/the researcher

circumstances in which children (participants) interact with school practitioners or peers in spontaneous and directed activities.

I planned visits to the classes attended by the children participating in the study, during the first two weeks of fieldwork, to take photographs of the context of teaching and learning. My visits occurred in line with local and research-based ethical protocols, unobtrusively (as far as possible), and involved two photo elicitation activities per school cluster or class team. A range of photographs, showing participating children in their school setting, was available to class teams and ‘read’ and discussed during the group activities (lasting approximately one hour). While I was present in each activity, to provide the photographs (and audio-record interactions), the group had the authority and freedom to choose the photographs and lead the discussion. Observing emerging practices of negotiation provided ulterior opportunities to acknowledge collaborative habits, priorities and presuppositions. With participants’ consent, I proceeded to audio-record responses (for later transcription) and take field notes during the elicitation process, limiting my interactions with participants to responses to questions arising occasionally during the activity. Practitioners chose to express their views verbally, and by taking notes to share their opinions with me either overtly or privately (via notes or email).

4.10 Philosophy of methods and social theory

Each method underlines my intention to involve participants, children and adults, using strategies and resources that validate their distinct capabilities and intersecting experiences and expertise. The philosophy of the methods provides the basis for a critical engagement of under-represented communities in the study of identity and

self-presentation through experience, bringing together “social and political thought relevant to discourse and language” (Fairclough, 1995: 62).

The diverse opportunities for dialogue and re-presentation illustrate the potential of interdisciplinarity in rendering participation accessible and meaningful, providing different modes and sites for exploring experience and agency. Strike (1974) might define this methodological goal as the “expressive potential” with which researchers can reduce the constraints of the linguistic boundaries between disciplines, to develop fluidity in their academic activity, thus broadening the effectiveness of participation and the significance of findings in affecting social change (*ibid*, 1974: 103).

This interdisciplinary approach to ‘linguistic boundaries in research’, in the methods of engagement, analysis and dissemination, reflects the different instances in which identities are formulated and different discourses embodied by social actors in different fields. “The concept of expressive potential serves as a way of looking at how the particular language used (e.g., behaviorist, sociocultural)” can help to identify and justify “what counts as research questions, methods, and ultimately as research” (Rex et al., 1998: 411-412). Including a range of expressive devices in the methodology and the multiplicity of languages deployed by participants through agentic and aesthetic choice invite personal discoveries in modes that are relevant to the individuals presenting their realities. Diversity, choice and personal repertoires, are made visible (and audible) in the interaction between knowledge and action (Toscano, 2012). Oral, visual and tangible outcomes established through multimodal participation can draw greater attention towards issues that manifest distinctions and social inequality.

A project with relational intent requires me to affirm the importance and significance of echoing values that draw upon respecting and recognising everyday practices and personal capabilities as sites for potential “energizing capacity” to subvert institutional authority (Sheringham, 2009: 17). Thus, conducting the fieldwork activities with children and adults in non-hierarchical and co-constructed (relational and actual) sites helped to minimise the power-divide between researcher and participants (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) and elevate children’s ‘versions of identity’ and their agency in the process. Fostering and observing self-presentation in purposeful spaces, resulting from responses to participants’ choices, can preserve the sense of belonging and agency that may strengthen the ways identities acquire visibility beyond the prescriptive ideas bound in deterministic discourses of dis/ability. Dialogue and situated experiences can collectively expose the characteristics of ‘common sense’ perspectives on childhood, children’s subjectivities and dis/ability, which are often limited to adults’ views and representations (Gramsci, 1992; Abbott, 2013; Davis et al., 2017). Common sense practices can oppose the recognition of children’s agency in different fields and the opportunity to be valued members of a process of knowledge production resulting from first-hand involvement (Prout, 2000; Alderson, 2017; Thomas, 2017). The active involvement in research, education and civic society, for children labelled by dis/abling diagnoses can be variable, underplayed, misunderstood or misrepresented, and associated with “human disconnection and incompetence” (Taylor, 2018: 2). These assumptions can legitimise non-participation and marginalisation, and develop into unchallenged exclusions and accepted common sense around the possibility of authentic representation (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam,

2014; Spyrou, 2019). Considering the contributions of children, parents and school practitioners, as interlinked and equally valuable can redress the potential of children's meaningful self-presentation.

In an enquiry that includes adults' views without subordinating children's accounts of experience and self, it is critical to understand and analyse the practices of influence, mediation and negotiation that determine the ways children self-identify, and the role of habitus, field and doxa in producing different versions of children's identities in contexts in which adults' viewpoints often prevail.

Analysing themes and discourses that shape identities, agency, inclusion/exclusion, and the rhetorical depictions of dis/ability, through a sociological lens can be useful in examining legitimised and perpetuated ideas about ability and the 'norm', defined (here) using Bourdieu's *doxa*. Doxa provides a critical link between the agents in a field and their capacity to enact and produce practices that become 'second nature' thus often remain unquestioned (Hanna, 2016).

Doxa is the relationship of immediate adherence that is established in practice between a habitus and the field to which it is attuned, the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense.

(Bourdieu, 2005a: 68)

Common sense and doxa evolve with the discourses associated with the fields in which they are accepted and promulgated (Coben, 2002); these might infer assumptions strengthened by the place in which they germinate or by the status attributed to particular social actors positioned as authoritative (Gramsci, 1992). For example, in the colonial gaze on children and the permanence of a medicalised discourse of distinction between childhoods, causing the impoverishment of experience of those situated on the margins (see Tortello, 2000; Valeri, 2006;

Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Vehmas and Shakespeare, 2015). Doxa provides the sociological premise to understand and analyse discourse, common sense and the role of adult-led identifying practices given priority, in particular fields, against the authentic representation of children's own subjectivities (of which identity can be considered the culmination).

Contesting the praxis of traditional or conventional methods for researching with children, I confronted the methodological concerns around participatory quality, autonomy and authenticity in research. To establish a purposeful research design, I have problematized marginalisation, evident in recruitment trends, participatory habits and ultimately in the dissemination of perpetuated discourses of difference; through reflexivity in the ethical planning and conduct of the fieldwork, in the aesthetic and narratological rendition of findings, and in my personal involvement in critical research scholarship.

I have deliberately avoided the notion of 'giving voice', which is frequently embedded in emancipatory research discourse, in itself an idea of (direct or inherent) methodological privilege towards particular discourses, abilities and audiences. I argue that giving 'space and listening' through a global disposition towards a multitude of communicative possibilities can enable greater fluidity in the exercise of agency across social fields and provoke broader and deeper understandings of self-presentation in research and beyond.

Moreover, the language used in research can contextualise the intentions of an investigation from the outset and, *vice versa*, disciplinary boundaries within which research resides can determine the discourses it transmits (and who the recipients of these are likely to be). A critical research stance recognises that methodological

decisions are embedded in the social reality that is being studied and that ethical participatory processes can engender social consciousness and action. Examining identity and agency in non-directive activities is a central component in the interpretation of social practices, it “allows an oscillation between the perspective of social structure and the perspective of social action and agency - both necessary perspectives in social research and analysis” that can be amplified through interdisciplinarity (Fairclough, 2001: 231).

As discussed by Gramsci (1992) the recognition that common sense crystallises conditioning practices in society is crucial in studying experiences of agency and identity formation, as well as potentially becoming the *fulcrum* for change. Bourdieu’s notions of habitus, field and doxa, complement Gramsci’s sociology, informing the social and civic drive to re-present children’s identities and unpack the social interactions in which they are situated (Walther, 2014).

4.11 Chapter conclusion

My civic intentions and a critical methodology had to cohere to produce a sustainable research space where genuine attentiveness to children’s research authority could be established through autonomy, choice and agency in the participatory experiences. Exploring thematic analysis and the tensions of researching discourse have channelled my interest to review my scholarship to better understand methodological practices involving children and adults for whom inequalities are salient (Warr, 2005; Raby, 2010; Roderick, 2018). This understanding has extended to planning and enacting participatory values that solicit more general, yet fundamental, reflections on the sociological and political purpose of research. My commitment to the quality of

participation is exemplified in the multimodal strategies used and in the conditions developed to support the realisation of meaningful membership in research. The methods informed by critical pedagogy and arts-based practices provide opportunities to review established participatory canons, in education and research, and to implement an interdisciplinary approach in the co-production of knowledge, engaging individual subjectivities and collective meaning-making. The study involves contributions from children, parents and school practitioners, which serve to represent the interactive social complex in which children's identities are formulated, embodied and defined.

In this chapter, I have introduced the philosophy of the study and the choices I have made to produce a developing methodology; to contribute to a critique of quality in the conditions for research participation, for children and other marginalised groups (Christensen and James, 2017; Nonhoff, 2017; Belluigi, 2018; Taylor, 2018). The originality of this civic and academic process is explored in detail in the next chapter, where I discuss the value of an environment that engages and respects children's leadership, in an attempt to minimise the position of power that has made fieldwork with children inherently problematic. I argue that the physical and relational environment and the material resources available to children have a critical role in favouring agency, resourcefulness and spontaneity that are manifested and expressed in unexpected and, in some cases, unprecedented ways. Multimodality and physicality, therefore, constitute central 'indicators' of children's expressions of identity and self-revelation, as do motivation, activity and inactivity in relation to the art materials offered and chosen (Eßer, 2018). The creative encounters, thus, provide

a needed opportunity to re-evaluate and re-present children's participation in research.

*All grown-ups were children once -
although few of them remember it.
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1944)*

Chapter 5

Creative encounters

5.1 Introduction

Previous chapters in the thesis have touched on the importance of engaging relationally with children. This chapter examines the contextual and ethical character of researching with children in creative spaces that reflect their decisional authority. An important aspect of establishing children's role (and personhood) in the study was their involvement in planning the creative space, which has methodological and sociological potential. Children engaged in dialogic processes, enabling the activation of their expressive abilities, from the outset of the research activity.

It will be argued that space has a powerful role in children's participation, agency and creative process. The discussion contributes to the aims of arts-based research by bringing together theories and practices that are traditionally bound in either educational research or artistic inquiry.

I foreground the ethical and practical implications of enabling an aesthetic articulation of experience through visual and tangible participation and discuss the value of providing the space for knowledge production using artistic methods in ways that interrupt directive and practitioner-led methodological assumptions. The purpose

is to unpack social and educational practices implicated in children's narratives while offering multiple points of entry to knowledge production, perspectives and renditions of experience. This characteristic of the study's methodology underlines the value of dialogue between researcher and participants, and their reciprocal engagement from the study's inception and throughout the research activities.

Dialogue and context are entwined in the development of a 'space' for aesthetic experience. The relationship between listening to children's requests, their choice of artistic media, and developing the creative and expressive activities, contributes to understanding the importance of exploring meaningful opportunities for self-presentation that are "enclosed in aesthetic experiences" (Borgdorff, 2011: 45).

The creative space and my role in the research process, in the Italian and English research sites, are presented. The discussion contributes to rebalancing the tendency of adults to remain cautious around spontaneity and autonomy in research with children, which is emphasised in methodologies that favour probable and measurable outcomes that in turn promote distinct hierarchies in the production of knowledge. I argue that the undefined possibilities that can stem from a creative and collaborative methodological approach to participation can be valuable in reviving the ethical responsibility of researching with children in sites that do not replicate formal instructive practices.

The relational disposition invested in the research terrain is essential to constructing an ethical and dialogic environment. The chapter contributes to prioritising both the practical and moral implications of researching with children employing methods that

are meaningful and flexible, while potentially at odds with more familiar adult-led interactions in education and research.

5.2 Planning a dialogic research framework

The prevailing emphasis of this methodology is on the responsiveness towards children's choices and spontaneity in the creative encounters. I argue that unless children are involved in the dialogic construction of the research context the power divisions inscribed in traditional methods are likely to guide children's expressive potential and limit the emergence of their agentic authorship. Thus, the creative encounters were planned following initial consultations with individual children, witnessed by parents, at the outset of the field activities. From the inception of the research exchanges to the corresponding environmental and material adaptations, the integration of children's choices was essential to the production of the methodology and a purposeful and conducive space for expressive activities.

I met with children and their parents to illustrate the nature of the creative encounters and initiate a process of dialogue to explore material and sensorial preferences that would lead to resourcing the art activities in ways that reflected and respected children's views. The introductory meetings with individual families occurred in March 2017 in Central Italy and at the end of the academic year (July 2017) in the North West of England, before the start of a ten-week period of fieldwork activities in each site.

During the meetings, children articulated their preference towards types of materials for mark-making, as well as textures, scents and, importantly, personal resources, interests and dislikes. I asked children to describe any materials they did not like to

work with or handle, in order to minimise any processing or sensory barriers that could obstruct the enjoyment of the activities, or inhibit participation, while taking into account their previous experiences (Rubin, 2005). The meetings had the purpose of illustrating the research activity while preparing to develop a space for self-expression and a trusting relationship with children and parents. In expressing my commitment to children's capability and to clarify my role as nurturing and permissive (Rubin, 2005), personal priorities and an understanding of children's interest to take part were validated. The meetings also became a stimulating talking point for parents to convey their curiosity for the creative activities, while advancing their awareness of their children's expressive capital.

When illustrating the study to receive their consent, parents, teachers and teaching assistants supplemented this information from their own observations and viewpoints. The value of these initial, essential, exchanges and the significance of the information shared cannot be underestimated. Importantly, respecting children's preferences and choices as well as adults' priorities and knowledges helped to form and nurture a network of critical research partnerships, to establish and integrate diverse capabilities from the outset. Furthermore, the accessibility and relevance of the materials on offer helped foster self-directed use and exploration, minimising any practical interference or need to request support.

Children's experiential processing and discoveries, the emergence of those capacities implicitly or explicitly understood as one's own individuality and strengths, became progressively evident. The validation of children's preferences, expressed in the availability of their materials of choice, and an environment that encouraged creative

freedom were essential in communicating and legitimising children's independent and autonomous actions.

This approach informed and enhanced the process of receiving assent, consent and parental approval, encouraging a collective appreciation of children's agency, and clarity towards the motivation for conducting the research within a fluid framework. Children and parents alike welcomed these intentions in both geographic sites. Importantly, the relational ethos of the project was presented overtly; prompting children and parents to express their views of children's agentic authority and my role as distinct from an educational one. A role that could enhance children's self-representation in and through artistic production (Malchiodi, 1998). Children's agency and positionality this way became inherent characteristics of their evolving participation. This premise enabled an involvement of children's knowledges and an increasing level of engagement from the outset. The initial meetings also led children and parents to ask questions to aid their understanding of the research process, thus providing insights into their appreciation of non-directive activities and the opportunity for children's personal choices to have a central place in the construction of knowledge.

5.3 Creative freedom, recognition and agency

In an arts-based methodology a co-constructed space can enable ulterior experiences to come to life in the interactions that occur between individual participants, the creative materials and the environment. The self-directed activity of making art can evoke responses that are both "symbolic and actual" (Hyland Moon, 2015: 56); internalised and embodied in the immediacy of the aesthetic object. The

interpersonal alliance with an atypical adult in the creative environment could also provide another point of reference of how children perceive “significant relationships in their lives” (Malchiodi, 1998: 181; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017).

Observing change, movement and choice-making and the signs of self-reward in children’s realisation of membership and engagement in the creative space, is in the interest of any researcher working with children, while it is essential to recognise that boundaries between children and adults remain methodologically and developmentally “irrevocably imposed” by societal discourses, practices and habits (Graue and Walsh, 1998: 80). Creativity, expressive autonomy and the pedagogic values intrinsic in my approach to these, meant that the encounters were planned with a central belief of providing not only suitable materials but also the conditions of trust and spontaneity I hoped children would enjoy, in an environment in which they would feel equally at ease and gratified (Bernardi, 2019b). In this respect, Moustakas (1959) wrote:

[...] to have materials and an adult entirely to himself, without any concern with sharing, being cooperative, being considerate, polite or mannerly. He can feel his feelings and express his thoughts all the way knowing that he is accepted and revered unconditionally.

(*ibid*, 1959: 42)

Unconditional participation happens in a meaningful *locus*, where adults are prepared to observe, acknowledge and respect the engagement of capability in the production of individuality (Devecchi et al., 2014; Sarojini Hart, 2014; Stoecklin and Bonvin, 2014). Specifically, the creative encounters (CE hereafter) offered the conditions and opportunities to value personal competencies, spontaneous verbal and nonverbal expression, in a dedicated space. The central aim of the encounters was to foreground

children's priorities, to engage in co-produced purposeful spaces and develop the relational conditions for enabling an autonomous activity.

The non-directive exploration of self-expression, the recognition and authentication of personal understandings, characteristics and experiences, emerged by harmonising tangible opportunities with creative freedom to present and re-present personal competencies and agency.

5.4 Situating the creative process

By the time the first creative encounter occurred, I had met all the children participating in the study either at their home or in school, to establish not only material preferences but also a choice of location for the creative activities.

I had imagined the CE with the view of these occurring within family homes, in order to support children's realisation of ownership of the events and to underline children's agency and licence to act spontaneously in familiar circumstances. The aim was to use a space where children could move safely and comfortably, to oversee and negotiate the creative environment, not least have the freedom to end the activity at a time of their choice.

Where parents indicated that for a variety of circumstances their home would not offer an appropriate space, I suggested that the activities could be carried out in school (after school). These initial decisions offered contextual insights into the role of schools in each cultural setting, in parents' overt and inherent discourses of embodied positionality and agentic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Vincent and Martin, 2002; Irwin and Elley, 2011; Bennett, Lutz and Jayaram, 2012; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). Presuppositions and distinctions attributed to different fields, activities and

adults, occupying different roles and positions, were presented in relation to children's opportunities to exert agency. These ideas evidenced parents' desire to support the CE in order for these to be distinct from instructional practices, thus perceiving the creative research activity as implicitly empowering.

Parents gave their consent and agreed a choice of venue with their child/children. This practice invited further opportunities to elicit children's authority and capability in their role in the study. Parents acknowledged that this collaborative stance could support their children more effectively, allowing other experiences associated with instructional practices to intrude less in the research activities and the creative interactions.

Further, engaging in creative practices in a space that is familiar or managed by children and not by adults (for example, parents might be present in the home, not in the activity), would provide children with greater control and leadership. In this process the researcher/adult becomes a guest in the child's space (Abbott, 2013).

Importantly, in most cases, the chosen space was consistent for individual children throughout the fieldwork activities. This was a crucial condition in the development of trust, unequivocal expectations and a sense of safety and purpose in each activity (Malchiodi, 1998). The location of the creative encounters played an important part in the development of the creative process and in the production of aesthetic outcomes. The physical arrangement of the space and the layout of materials supported malleable spatial relations as well as comfort in the practical activities.

The choices expressed by individual children and the ethical ethos of the research conditions materialised in resourcing a bank of tools and media that were together accessible and appealing, and presented in ways that reflected personal requests. This

way, children had little doubt that the activities were prepared by validating their decisions. Acknowledging children's visual and concrete contributions to plan the creative activities enabled reciprocity and trust in the research environment. Through a careful and sensitive engagement with children's creative and experiential contributions, the location of the creative encounters became a purposeful and protected space for the enactment of personal viewpoints and the emergence of capabilities. The creative environment was obtained by 'transforming' spaces that had a range of pre-existing functions; these were, for example, school libraries and classrooms, kitchens in children's homes, and an arts studio (in Italy). In each case, the ways in which materials were presented and replenished rendered my responses to children's requests visible and tangible. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate two contextual examples of the range and presentation of selected materials at the start of a session in England (Figure 2, p.175) and in Italy (Figure 3, p.178).

The resulting artefacts and self-expression materialised in creative processes situated in the contextual and relational research space (Herzog, 2005; Mannion, 2007; Nolas, 2011; Poretti, 2018; Flewitt et al., 2018).



Figure 2. Materials prepared in the nursery classroom, NW England. 12.09.2017

5.5 Sharing an ethical commitment

During the fieldwork activities, in each country, parents and children had the choice of using a space in school or ‘hosting’ the encounters in the family home. In North West England a space set up in schools, for each creative activity, was the most popular choice; with two children hosting the encounters in their family home.

In Central Italy, none of the participants took up the offer of using a place in school, potentially signifying a desire to distinguish the research relations from interactions in school. Some children hosted the creative encounters in their home and, where this was not feasible, some used my arts studio for their activity (individual choices are presented in Chapter 6). While I had not foreseen nor planned for this possibility, I found that the studio was the only other suitable place I could offer. Just as I had hoped families would accommodate the activities by moving away important furniture and ornaments, I proceeded to set up the studio by removing items that were not relevant to the activities, in order for children to enjoy the environment and the art

materials and appropriate the space as their own. In Italy, children and parents accessed the studio for most of the CE and some interviews, or combined attending the studio with sessions in their home. Ultimately, only one child and his mother elected the family home for all four CE as they felt they could easily adapt their space to suit the activities. The majority of children and parents chose the studio for either logistical reasons or a sense of situational meaningfulness they attributed to the activities *a priori* (as suggested by parents in the information meetings, early in the fieldwork). For some families this decision involved both reasons, namely the logistical necessity due to the limiting, or limited, space in their homes and a sense of purpose associated with working with me away from the family home in a context arranged specifically for creative practices; this was a common view expressed by parents in dialogue with their children.

Parents' accommodating outlook reflected my ethical commitment to provide freedom of choice and movement, and potentially the removal of any pressure associated with finding a suitable place in the family home. Parents' comments and dispositions generated a growing sense of trust on the part of participants (both adults and children) and suggested a commitment to potential, anticipated, benefits ascribed to the creative activities. Above all, in these circumstances I prepared to receive protective parents that might be uneasy around the idea of their children sharing their time and creative abilities with an unfamiliar adult in an unknown place. From the outset, parents' testimonies demonstrated a great interest in being involved in supporting their children's independence in circumstances together new and compatible with children's habitual activities. Importantly, because the majority of CE took place in the studio all the ethical premises for the project became more

significant and were adapted as I planned the space so that the creative acts could occur in safety and freedom. To plan an environment that could accommodate children's ownership of the activities, the context had to be both neutral and comfortable. Thus, I placed great attention in creating the conditions for a safe and relaxed activity, for independent movement, expression and interaction. It is important to note that the choice of venue, in any research activity, can underline particular presuppositions and experiences. Reflecting on these possibilities can contribute to highlighting the ethical dimension of the research process while respecting participants' positions and assumptions (Elwood and Martin, 2000). The layout of the space had to communicate a sense of freedom and accessibility that extended to my adaptability to children's management of the resources, in a sort of delegation of the 'terrain' in which I became an observer, accommodating safe exploration without limiting children's self-expression, while supporting their independent decision making. All children carried out their autonomous activity on the floor, accessing materials spontaneously from a resources area (Figure 3).



Figure 3. The resources table and an assent form⁹ (far right). Central Italy. 06.04.2017

⁹ For examples of the pictorial assent forms see Appendix 2

Space, materials and time

I had to consider the variety and quantity of materials made available for each activity, creatively and practically; in order to limit children's potentially overwhelming 'ambition' to use all that was present on the 'resources table' or 'area'. Thus, the choice of providing uncomplicated materials also gave rise to opportunities for children to display their own resourcefulness and spontaneous problem-solving ideas, through the combination and adaptation of tools and colours, for example. The availability of a generous supply of the chosen media, however, was essential. This helped to accommodate children's diligence, which I could not anticipate nor limit and, at the same time, put me at ease in the knowledge that I would be able to observe the activities attentively without being preoccupied by the need to replenish paper, paints and other supplies. The underlining sustainability of the activity reflected children's creative engagement and my observation of their motivation and intent, with minimal interruption. I had anticipated each CE to last around thirty minutes, however my estimate was significantly surpassed, with each activity sustained for an hour and ten minutes, on average, with the shortest lasting 55 minutes and the longest lasting two hours.

The flexibility of time and the physical layout of the space, and the type and range of available materials, were essential characteristics that caused children to act and interact and make art while sharing their views and personal feelings (Malchiodi, 1998; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Stafford, 2017; Tickle, 2017). Moreover, the relational ethos in which children's ideas materialised became a critical factor in supporting the creative and participatory processes.

During the first and second CE, all children used materials from a similar range that included: rolls of paper, heavy paper sheets, charcoal sticks in different weights, finger paints, water based and acrylic paint (in a range of colours and consistencies for pouring and dipping), thick and fine markers, coloured pastels, pencils, and tools such as, natural sponges, brushes, spatulae, wooden spoons, parcel tape and scissors. During the third and fourth CE, salt-dough was introduced and added as a modelling medium, and in other instances specific requests were accommodated, at different times, and these are described in the analysis. Children also brought items from home, such as toys and objects, which contributed to their narratives and to securing a sense of leadership and agency in the creative space. Erasers were not available so that children would have to preserve all possibilities, enjoy their visual discoveries or find alternative ways of changing the appearance of their marks without removing these (only one child noticed this ‘omission’ on one occasion).

My participation: presence, field notes and using the camera

Alongside the indispensable tangible materials available to children, an important element for the promotion and validation of self-discovery, through children’s actions and visual outcomes, was my authentic attentiveness towards their creative activity and any other form of interaction they chose to display. It became evident that the possibility of autonomy was a new experience for most children involved in the study, expressed through children’s behaviour, vocal and gestural expressions. The CE provided the opportunity to have the committed yet ‘silent’ attention of an adult; a type of commitment that appeared to be together essential and novel for participants (Moustakas, 1959; Malchiodi, 1998; Rubin, 2005; Greenwood, 2012; Huss, 2016).

Therefore, the way I recorded my observations and photographed actions and artefacts had to be sensitive to children's motivation and reactivity to the camera and could not reduce my attentiveness towards their silent or vocal embodied activity. Using the camera, overall, appeared to be less intrusive in the dialogic nature of the CE than taking field notes. Children, in some instances, asked me about the reason or content of my writing, peering across to look at my notebook to ensure I had recorded their words or commentaries or adding these 'first-hand' (see Figure 29, p.228).

In all cases, my 'posturing' and participation were crucial in promoting and sustaining independence and trust, and as children spoke to me, sang, or looked at me, to seek feedback, I responded with immediacy and reflected their communicative preferences accordingly.

The range and manifestations of interactional participation developed progressively during the activities. I committed to a non-hierarchical stance, both physical and relational, in responding to children, their art making and art, through reciprocal adjustments and gestures, thus my non-directive gaze became unequivocal.

Mutuality: sharing the floor space and having bare feet

The creative activities evolved on the floor, inviting fluidity between movement and the use of materials, minimising the potentially reductive size and appearance of a table or desk, and establishing a seamless creative habitat in which children's aesthetic and embodied activity could manifest in an open yet secure space.

At the start of each encounter, children took off their shoes and sat on the floor and I did the same. Like them, I wore clothes that were together comfortable and suitable for creative 'work'. These details (which might appear to be superfluous or banal)

promoted a sense of purpose, reciprocal engagement and status, and were essential in inviting and sustaining children's embodied agency and participation. Moreover, these behavioural and contextual adjustments were critical in supporting the needed comfort, thoughtfulness, and practical and experiential credibility of each activity. In this context, I prepared to witness revealing and transformational events and self-directed manifestations of personal capability and identity. The combination of personal and environmental adaptations was essential in inducing participation and securing children's sense of membership and agency in this space. In my role, I participated as an attentive bystander, so that children could lead the use of the space and have control over the time spent on their activity. My disposition in the creative encounters fostered flexibility of time and respect for children's personal choices and priorities. The creative authority delegated to children informed my adaptable positioning.

Autonomy and mutuality, in exploring personal capabilities, are central principles in critical pedagogy, and offer a useful stance for an ethical engagement of children's agency in research. As discussed by Montessori (2004/1950) this stance allows children "to express themselves freely, and thus reveal to us needs and aptitudes which remain hidden and repressed when there does not exist an environment which allows free scope for their spontaneous activity" (*ibid*, 2004: 63).

The creative environment prompted the activation of spontaneity and the integration of both conscious and subconscious feelings in aesthetic form (Merleau-Ponty, 1993; Zeki, 1999, 2009; Quinn, 2011).

The “liberation of the hand, the dedication of the upper limbs” to articulate expressive functions unifies “psyche and movement” (Montessori, 2011/1936: 64). These practices, fostered in therapeutic play for example, facilitate participation beyond the use of words (Bates, 2008).

Concrete activities thus can propel the production of abstract ideas and tacit knowledge (Pain, 2012). Autonomy, choice and intentionality become visible in children’s interactions with materials, manipulating and selecting media, in ways that are personally appealing and meaningful. All forms of interactivity with materials including pauses, curiosity and inactivity, in this scheme, are equally valued, as important forms of self-expression and agency (Seiden, 2001). This ethos respects the production of diverse and personal responses, validating a variety of possibilities to enhance participation and children’s active representation in research, through multiple and symbolic expressive contributions (Zeki, 2009; Quinn, 2011; Slager, 2011). The creative space became a visible representation of an ethical framework in which material conditions encourage the embodiment and validation of diverse expressive possibilities. Importantly, the visual and creative materials provided alternative, potentially more appealing, tools for children to communicate and identify personal views without relying solely on verbal ability and skills. Visible and concrete outcomes also provided a means of preserving particular subjectivities and meanings, sheltered and contained within the aesthetic products and purposeful signs of experience, made accessible to the observer only in part.

Perhaps the most important aspect of non-verbal work with children is that it satisfies them deeply, helping them to feel seen and heard without losing any of the mystery of life experience.

(McCarthy, 2008: 16)

The creative materials represented purposeful leads for spontaneous exploration, thus encouraging independent choice making in a format that did not replicate classroom activities. This also encouraged parents and children to distinguish the research methods from activities that were seen as instructive, exclusive, or forced, through the schooling of art (Penketh, 2016; Bernardi, 2019a). This model of enabling participation shifted leadership to children, promoting spontaneous and independent action and access to a range of personal and tangible discoveries.

The reflexive nature of the process was endorsed in the relational and physical construction of the creative space and relational exchanges within it, enabling a variety of aesthetic 'acts' to occur, which could not be anticipated. Consequently, the material and tactile quality of the data and my observations of movement, motivation, engagement, verbal and nonverbal self-identifying narratives and expressions of experience, merge situational immediacy with wider socio-cultural discourses (Mitchell, 2011). The aesthetic products that emerged reference the environmental conditions circulating around the expressive actions (location, time, tools, etc.) and are, equally, representational of the impact of broader, dominant, discourses that shape individual identities and contextual experiences of self.

The artistic processes and children's representations make explicit the implicit, referencing discursive practices that infer and mould personal potential and agency. These processes of experience and meaning-making, situated in aesthetic products of sociological importance, contribute to the analysis of the range of opportunities for self-presentation available to children in research and education.

The creative encounters highlighted the value of a protected (creative) space for self-expression within its perceived boundaries, drawing attention to the articulation of

struggles that might reside within particular “subject positions” and fields, and their transference to other domains (Fairclough, 1995: 69).

Ownership of the creative activity gave children the freedom to withdraw, to adapt and manipulate materials, making autonomous choices that provided an unequivocal entitlement to contribute personal views. These choices can be seen as acts of agentic resourcefulness and resistance, prompting reflections on the criticality of a methodology that serves to dispel persistent participatory parameters, while highlighting that children’s agency and status in other settings may be influenced by differences in “positions and associated discursive conventions” (Fairclough, 1995: 69).

The creative/expressive methods represent children’s opportunity to participate holistically, in a research activity that provides the conditions to experience intentionality; Searle (1999) relates to this notion as the “primordial” form of “perceiving and doing” (*ibid*, 1999: 36). The resulting thematic outcomes are analysed as the interplay of discourses emerging from aesthetic participation, recognition and the embodiment of personal forms of self-presentation.

5.6 Hesitation and embodiment

Before discussing children’s presentation and re-presentation in other contexts, it is important to evaluate how children established their embodied agency in the creative acts. The creative encounters offered a space for children to explore their creative capabilities, either immediately or incrementally, by experimenting with materials, symbols and embodiment, moving beyond the discourses attached to preconceived

boundaries, distinctions and other “identifications conventionally appropriate” and noticeable in other settings (Jenkins, 2014: 125).

Children observed my disposition, my attentiveness and non-interference, potentially in contention with their experiences and views of interacting with other adults (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). This became apparent in children’s tentative playfulness at the start of each ‘first’ creative encounter. Children adapted progressively to the relational and contextual freedom, and this was visible in their ability to discover and employ tools to communicate and persuade through performance, aesthetic engagement and openness. The image of Andrea¹⁰, wrapped in towels (available in the arts studio) captures his desire to disrupt conventional boundaries and explore, and adjust to, spontaneity. His leadership in the activity materialised in his willingness to embody agency through movement, proximity and mark-making, contributing to the establishment of a transformative and evolving creative relationship secured by reciprocal trust.

¹⁰ Andrea (10) Central Italy



Figure 4. Andrea wrapped in towels. Performance. 20.04.2017

In my role, in my choice to sit with the children and observe, I found ways of embodying equal status or indeed preparedness to follow instructions, solicited by children's desire to share their ideas and lead, which revealed critical and contextual processes invested in the representation of character and agency.

Importantly it was through my proximity to the physical and material action (unafraid of a variety of creative possibilities) that I was able to convey a collaborative and permissive disposition that children relied upon for conducting their embodied and experiential activities (Rubin, 2005). The methodological potential of children's autonomy and spontaneity, highlights the loss of diversity in other *fora*, in which hierarchies, distinctions and inequality appear to prevail, and extends the purpose of the aesthetic data.

The human body is simultaneously a referent of individual continuity, an index of collective similarity and differentiation and a canvas upon which identification can play.

(Jenkins, 2014: 43)

Appraising the critical need for research that provides the conduit to autonomous self-representation, through experiential, visual and non-linguistic processes, it is possible to emphasise the value of embodiment in communicating the *self* (Siegesmund and Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Jenkins, 2014; Huss, 2016; O'Farrell, 2017). The aesthetic products simultaneously established and captured the agentic purpose of the creative acts. Children explored individuality and relationality, engaging with personal and evolving expressive symbols, language and manipulation of existing and adapted communicative tools.

The visual data show the gradual intention to embody agency, from the initial surprise, or timidity, to visible assertiveness in the presentation of self. Thus, denoting the nature of children's creative horizons and expressive capital.

The example of Roberto¹¹ shows one of his experiments using paint on his arms, on the paper and on the floor (Figure 5, on the next page).

¹¹ Roberto (6) Central Italy



Figure 5. Paint, movement and self-reward. Roberto. Photographic sequence. 21.04.2017

Roberto engaged in different characterisations (from the animal kingdom), to involve me in play that revealed his cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2005a). His aesthetic activity exceeded his verbal capabilities. Thus, the creative tools and his personal resourcefulness enabled Roberto to reframe his ability to communicate matters of personal significance, knowledge and creativity, adapting and embodying his artistic agency.

Like other children in the study, he positioned himself in a powerful role, deliberately engaging me in an effective guessing game through expressive gestures for questions as well as celebration. The sequence shows the liberal approach to children's creative potential and is representative of the majority of creative encounters. Through bodily-kinaesthetic engagement, Roberto became increasingly confident in his

spatial-motor activity, spontaneously interrupting assumptions around what were perceived to be (in formal contexts) limited communication skills¹².

Some children had only used art materials (usually dry media) in instructional tasks, led by adults, in school (Penketh, 2016). Other children had never used paint and some, like Fabio (aged 8), were “*frightened by conventional mark-making tools*” (Fabio’s mother). This was particularly noticeable in the Italian examples; while children in the English sample had access to some ‘liberal’ creative opportunities, such as “*school art day*” and a “*messy corner*” in their learning setting (teaching assistant, NW England). Contextualising children’s hesitation in a geo-cultural field therefore can provide a salient point of reference to appreciate their interaction with the creative space and previous experiences. The combination of pictorial expression and embodiment, punctuated the purpose of the creative environment in providing children with increasing agentic authority through aesthetic self-realisation. As Hall (2015) suggests,

The ethically aware researcher is not only concerned with exploring the journeys both towards and stemming from the drawings, but also seeks to make time and space to join the child as a fellow traveller in co-constructing inter subjective meanings, with the child clearly positioned as the navigator.

(Hall, 2015: 155)

Ultimately, all children displayed an aptitude for adapting the environment to suit their activity, to communicate, explore and enact personal stories in imaginary spaces made visible through the creative process. My participation solicited by children through play, verbal and nonverbal storytelling, appeared to legitimise children’s

¹² Summary of description from class teacher (photo elicitation focus group data)

experiential construction of meaning through movement and personal, abstract and material, resources. Through this empowering process of co-production, led by children, personal narratives and creativity emerged incrementally in the process of interactivity and engagement, disrupting habitual power relations (Thomson and Hall, 2008; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). Tangible and aesthetic meaning-making, also, highlighted the impact of positionality, common sense and societal discourses in other fields (Gramsci; 1947; Bourdieu; 1985; Terzi, 2014). Children thus were able to explore diverse literacies and experiential communication by reinventing boundaries, their social positions and their imaginative worlds in the creative acts.

5.7 Concluding thoughts

My reasons for developing the creative encounters with children evolved into understanding children's ability to reclaim their identities in spaces that are conducive and open to experiential possibilities, harmonising individuality and agency. Providing opportunities for children to produce and share their (own) versions of experience and identity, instigated a process of redress in the quality of participation in research, as well as exploring issues of marginalisation and the opportunity to embody agency in other fields. In addition, it is possible to investigate the impact of common sense, nuances of meaning and commonalities of experience, in children's perceptions of self across cultures and fields, through a liberal approach to experiential (arts-based) participation that evolves into a shared aesthetic language.

It is important to note that this intent has provoked the development of critical social values, adaptations and *foci*, at different stages in the research activity. These have been together interdependent and pivotal in my dialogue with participants, to

appreciate their situated realities merging societal discourses with subjectivities. The value of these activities, in the study of identity in childhood, provokes a recalibration of children's agency, problematizing the *lacunae* in education and dis/ability research, to establish a platform for children's concrete collaboration and autonomous representation.

The co-production of a conducive research space and the relational interactions therein ensured that children could consciously and inherently present and represent their identities, rendering experience visible. Potential methodological barriers were 'lifted' through a multimodal approach to arts-based methods, initiating critical dialogic interactions with children, fostering personal engagement and self-revelation. The methodology and its theoretical underpinning, situated within artistic and sociological inquiry, support the rigour and responsibility of applying a critical thematic analysis to aesthetic data, to promote and advance social change through the active and experiential engagement of marginalised groups (Fairclough, 1989; Luke, 2002; Huss, 2016; Bartlett, 2018).

Ultimately, every research activity, including aesthetic research, is socially and politically situated, thus the emergence of sociological themes exhibits and exposes discourses and practices that surround these activities. The creative space, thus becomes an integral part of the methodology; a place in which it is possible to disrupt conventional redescriptions of children's agency, experiences and identities. This approach situates tangible and aesthetic data at the core of the analysis. The visual and aesthetic outcomes are not seen as an accessory to other forms of data, they are a central catalyst in the promotion of emerging views that would otherwise remain intangible (Banks and Zeitlyn, 2015). Employing arts-based methods supports an

agentic model of participation, while concurrently prompting a critical evaluation of children's access to creative agentic freedom in other contexts (Vickerman, 2012; Penketh, 2016).

Part III Analysis, Perceptions and Structures

Chapter 6

“Look at me I’m an artist”¹³

Identity, creativity and agency. Exploring the self and other

6.1 Introduction to the chapter and analysis

The previous chapter introduced the contextual conditions of the *creative encounters* in terms of the practical adaptations made to recognise and reflect children’s choices from the outset, alongside a discussion on the value of being present and non-directive in the observation of children’s approaches to knowledge-sharing and self-discovery. I have argued that researchers and adults more generally can engage in an egalitarian dialogue with children if the conditions designed to support this are overtly rendered in the layout of a (research) space that favours autonomy over instructing and questioning (Thomson and Hall, 2008; Thomas, 2017; Bernardi, 2019a). As will be illustrated in this chapter, “a partnership approach to research” can enable relationality, while centring and respecting children’s diverse capabilities (Thomas, 2017: 163).

Inspired by critical pedagogic theory (Montessori, 2014/1935 and Freire, 2005/1970), arts-based scholarship (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Stirling and Yamada-Rice, 2015; Foster, 2016) and person-centred therapeutic practices (Kalff, 1980; Huss, 2016), the field activities demonstrate that research interactions are enriched by blurring disciplinary boundaries and re-positioning the researcher.

¹³ Matt (6) North West England

Childhood sociology and arts-based methods (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015; Corsaro, 2018) have informed the language(s) and disposition to engage in a dialogue with children as experts; through relationality, recognition, quality and autonomy in the research process. This type of relational process has contributed “a richly contextualized, emicly sensitive, and humble wisdom to the understanding of human processes, structures, struggles, and possibilities” (Pitman and Maxwell, 1992: 768). This chapter engages with these issues in depth, by exploring children’s insights, interpretations and knowledges emerging from their material, gestural and vocal activity.

The chapter is constructed in three parts, in keeping with the chronology of the field activities, the first part is dedicated to introducing the children that took part in the research project in Central Italy; while the second examines my observations and findings from the creative encounters in NW England. I discuss the ways children contributed to the research by interacting with materials and the environment, in which their expressive activity evolved, creating artefacts with which to explore their identities and social worlds and the interaction between them.

The descriptive nature of these accounts reflects the conventions used in report writing in play therapy, the arts therapies and arts-based research (Kramer, 1973; Kalff, 1980; Huss, 2013; Alerby, 2015; Mannay et al., 2017). It is with such conventions in mind that I prioritise and underline children’s experiential activity and their visual and textual commentaries. By adopting this ethos, the artefacts created by children become tangible and visible records of children’s agency and intent. The aesthetic data draw attention to the structured nature of children’s agentic status in educational and societal contexts, while inducing an examination of the opportunities

and motivation to participate as active social agents through creative, relational and explorative self-presentation.

The third part of the chapter is dedicated to the analysis of important sociological themes drawn from children's multimodal renditions of self and the reflections, observations and interpretations that illustrate the extent to which children access their agency and self-realisation in different fields. Concurrently, the analysis is a critical appraisal of children's capability to participate in a civic debate such as research (Davis and Hill, 2006; Holt, 2007; Martin and Franklin, 2010; Lomax, 2015; Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018). Throughout the discussion, I attempt an evolving exchange between children's identities and the discourses that surround them, through a narrative account that places visual, literal and experiential outcomes in 'dialogue' with theory. Whilst this choice may not conform to pre-established canons for the linear conversion of findings into themes, a number of researchers argue that the process of analysis must involve assimilation, reflection and presentation, and different forms of data at different stages in the course of a study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1997; Hollway and Jefferson, 2013; Pickering and Kara, 2017).

The aesthetic value of the works and 'experiential narratives' denotes the importance of autonomy and dialogue in producing the analysis of multimodal data as a vehicle for authentic re-presentation. In the process, children's sociological consciousness emerges from the gestures and narratives, enabling self-expression, that are valuable for examining both educational practices and methodological tendencies dominating the nature of research with children and the reductionist approach to their agency and capability (Holt, 2007; Terzi, 2014; Pickering and Kara, 2017).

Giving aesthetic form to ideals, thoughts and stories, can enable the visibility of narratives that contrast and extend the expectations and perceptions of children's identity and personhood in other fields (see, for example, Moss et al., 2007; Thomson, 2008; Kaplan, 2008; Thomas, 2017; Yamada-Rice, 2017). Moreover, the analysis of themes across geo-cultural contexts integrates children's creative engagement with agency with a critical examination of the extent to which social structures and distinctions affect children's identities. As will be shown throughout the chapter, in line with Thomas (2017), my findings suggest that many of the children, across sites, share personal subjectivities and experiences that evoke attention to their ability to communicate aspects of their childhood that they privilege and interpret in sophisticated ways, offering valuable insights into their worlds (Kellett, 2010; Thomas, 2017; Corsaro, 2018). Children's views illustrate the value of a dialogic approach that respects independent explorations, posing important sociological questions on identity, agency and inequality in research, and extend to themes relating to children's cultures, expertise and the circumstances in which these realities are embedded. Emerging themes from situated subjectivities and collective narratives demonstrate significant commonalities of experience that are the fruit of historical structured approaches to difference that are visible and persistent across geo-cultural sites.

The photographs and children's commentaries provide a 'road map' for the analysis of themes in which aesthetic, verbal and nonverbal acts merge with the spontaneous and deterministic quality of children's interactions. The photographs frame significant moments in the encounters and serve to illustrate the character and location of the creative activities in each site. The examples presented also illustrate

children's reactivity to my 'participant status' and role, and my entry into the field (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). Further, children's responsiveness to using the creative environment and materials, which reflected their requests made during the initial information meetings, is critical in the evaluation of the relevance of the methods used to reimagine reflexivity and authenticity in research.

In accordance with the literature (see Alerby and Bergmark, 2012; Alerby, 2015; Blight and Eady, 2015; Raburu, 2015; Gernhardt et al., 2016), the production and the presentation of images as method and evidence of participation can contribute to the study of children's lived experiences and encourage openness to their views emerging with authenticity and in multiple forms. This premise is of greater significance in the study of identity, childhood and experience of children whose participation is seldom established through the exercise of autonomy (Franklin and Sloper, 2009; Hill, 2009; Davis and Watson, 2017). This way the study would appear to be "in contrast with the (ableist) discursive traditions that persistently reduce and dominate children's agentic authorship in research" (Bernardi, 2019b). Consequently, there continue to be discursive and representational *lacunae* in the study of childhood, through a lack of engagement of children with a diagnosis or dis/ability in non-directive forms of self-presentation (Martin and Franklin, 2010; Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2016).

The analysis is the first stage in propagating a discussion on the sociological value of meaningful participation as a vehicle for validating personal views and authentic self-presentation, disrupting methodological uncertainties around involving children (with a diagnosis) in research and in unconventional ways (Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Skyrme and Woods, 2018). If assumptions regarding children's capabilities and competencies are inflexible, research will continue to reproduce the

perceptions of vulnerability and dis/ability persistent in other social spheres, while maintaining the under-representation of individuals positioned at the intersection of ageism/childism (Young-Bruehl, 2012) and ableism (Carter, 2009; Skyrme and Woods, 2018).

The “assumption that children have the right to express their views about matters important to them” (Bell, 2008: 8; Alderson, 2017; Thomas, 2017) is perceived to be inherent in the conduct of research with children, yet such a right is often underplayed or neglected. Hierarchal methodological structures that delimit children’s interest and ability to engage in research can sift (and exclude) children according to performative assumptions (Hart, 1992; Van Beers, Invernizzi and Milne, 2006; Johnson, 2010; Davis et al., 2017). Researchers and children thus inherently participate in knowledge production that is ideologically and sociologically deterministic *a priori*.

The performative tendency of ‘researching disability’ by foregrounding difference appears to be intrinsic in the life cycle of social science research, this way dis/abled children “are often absent from research other than that focusing on disability” (Hill, 2009: 68; Shakespeare and Watson, 1999, 2001; Gabel and Peters, 2004; Beaudry, 2016). For example, by comparison with Kelly (2005) who explored children’s ability to “articulate their experiences of impairment and disability” (*ibid*, 2005: 268), the children involved in this study were able to act in a space in which capabilities emerged strongly, having the opportunity and the conditions to explore their identity away from guiding discourses and questions tied to disciplinary *foci*.

Together, the aesthetic representations and the analysis provide a way of paying attention to children’s views, bringing to the fore contentious issues of educational and methodological marginalisation, representation and social reproduction. While

the value of agentic experience, in and through the creative acts, manifests deep meanings of self and other, captured in children's art.

A work of art is only of interest, in my opinion, when it is an immediate and direct projection of what is happening in the depth of a person's being. It is my belief that only in this art can we find the natural and normal processes of artistic creation in their pure and elementary state.

(Dubuffet, 1967: 116)

The analysis offers a dedicated space (in the thesis) for an interpretation of children's art, while also maintaining that creative acts have a temporal, situated and embodied quality in the immediacy of their realisation. The photographs thus can stimulate further exploration, diverse questions and reflections, by audiences occupying different social positions, beyond such temporality. These include methodological questions on the possibilities for children to engage in self-presentation that is not reliant on textual data. The multiplicity of interpretations, temporality and resonance from the aesthetic data entail that the present analysis too is situated and partial (Bruner, 1986; McNiff, 2013; Moon, 2002, 2013; Leavy, 2015).

6.2 Entering the field

The analysis comprises examples from sixty-three individual creative encounters (CE) with sixteen children (14 M, 2F; aged 6-10), in Central Italy and NW England. Table 2, on the next page, shows the demographic characteristics of children-participants and their attendance in the Italian and English field activities. Culturally-relevant pseudonyms replace (children and adults') names as suggested by participants and as indicated in the ethical protocol for the project. The sequence presented follows the chronological order in which children joined the research

activities, by providing their assent supplemented by parental consent; in addition to which individual assent was provided at the start of each CE (see Appendix 2).

Seq.	Participants	Age	Gender	Year/Class Group (Italian cohorts)	Cluster (Italy only)	School	CE attended
1	Antonio	8	M	3	2	A	4/4
2	Marco	8	M	3	2	A	4/4
3	Paolo	10	M	5	2	B	4/4
4	Andrea	10	M	5	2	A	4/4
5	Roberto	6	M	1	2	B	4/4
6	Fabio	8	M	3	3	C	4/4
7	Luigi	9	M	4	3	D	4/4
8	Stefano	7	M	2	3	C	4/4
				Year/Class Group (English cohorts)		School	
9	Scott	10	M	6		E	4/4
10	Susie	7	F	3		F	4/4
11	Angela	10	F	6		G	3/4
12	Akeem	8	M	4		H	4/4
13	Matt	6	M	1		E	4/4
14	Luke	7	M	3		G	4/4
15	Chris	7	M	3		F	4/4
16	Toby	6	M	2		I	4/4

Table 2

The characteristics of significant individual sessions or clusters of sessions presented offer a catalogue of the visual and expressive activities and highlight the relational nature of children's interactions with the art materials, the physical space and myself. I describe the environment and the ways in which children, their families and teachers, contributed to co-creating the space to accommodate the research activities, then explore in detail how children planned and realised their creative acts. The progressive processes of self-revelation that children embarked upon in the course of

such activities are examined; it is also worth noting that all participants were new to research involvement.

The setting of the events, stories and experiences explored, helps to contextualise children's contributions *in situ*, my role in the field, and the cultural parameters from which I have drawn the *corpus* of data. First, I introduce the children in their familial context in each country and describe the cultural and material characteristics of the research setting; I then proceed with the analysis of children's explorations of their views and identities in the creative encounters.

6.3 *Incontri creativi*: Childhood, self and other in the Italian context

The field activities carried out in Italy comprise eight complete case studies. Specifically, I present examples from the thirty-two individual creative encounters (CE) that took place over ten weeks, from March to May 2017, with eight children (8M) from four mainstream primary schools in the same town. This part of the chapter describes a chronological process, from the initial meetings with children and families to the development of methods and 'spaces' in the field, to the aesthetic works examined to understand children's everyday lives, identities and habitus (Bourdieu, 2005a).

Antonio and Marco

Antonio and Marco are eight and are identical twin brothers; they have two older brothers and two older sisters (who are twins). Antonio and Marco participated in the study as individuals; this appeared to be critical in the way they expressed their assent to participate and in gaining their parents' approval to take part in the study. An

established synchronicity appeared to be part of their family and school life: the boys played together and interacted with peers and siblings in tandem, as I was able to note during my visits to the family home and school.

At the start of the research process, I visited Antonio and Marco in school and observed first-hand how their individuality seemed to depend on concrete and linguistic choices made by the adults around them. A ‘collective identity’ appeared to prevail in the interactions with their support teacher; Antonio and Marco were addressed consistently as a duet, “*questi due*” (these two) or “*cip e ciop*” (Chip 'n Dale)¹⁴. The boys shared a desk in class and their interactions with adults in school reflected a ‘collective estimation’ of their skills, this revealed competitiveness in their desire for attention in attempting to establish their personal abilities and needs. Children’s descriptions of their experiences of school, which emerged during the CE, aligned with parents’ perceptions and concerns, and my own observations. Participation in the creative activities therefore gave Antonio and Marco an opportunity to practise establishing themselves as individuals and have personalised attention and space.

Antonio and Marco, their siblings and parents, supported the idea of individual sessions in the research activities and the offer to host the activities in the family home. As requested by their parents, Antonio and Marco’s CE occurred consecutively on the same day each week, after school; thus, at the end of each session I took great care in concealing what Antonio had made, before Marco came into the space, in order to preserve the works as both private and unique. This did not inhibit Marco’s curious questioning, at the start of each session, when he would ask

¹⁴ Photo Elicitation data, 04.04.2017

to see what his brother had made and to find how his brother had behaved during the time spent with me. Marco's inquisitive tone was often characterised by the presupposition that his brother was likely to have misbehaved. When I praised his brother's collaborative behaviour, Marco always made comments that expressed playful incredulity. Questions around what 'he' had made and 'how *he* had behaved' progressively diminished. Yet, it would take a few minutes for Marco and Antonio to relax and establish themselves in the creative space as individuals in their own right. Eventually the original questions began to leave room for expressions of personal or conventional curiosities (e.g. Antonio and Marco would ask "what job do you do?" or "are you married?" or "how old are you?" and "do you like painting *with* me?" Although I never did paint with the boys).

At the end of the first CE, the boys asked me if they could take turns to alternate who would be 'first' in the next and subsequent CE; this was an important reaction to the autonomy they had established in the creative environment, showing they were eager to plan our future meetings and thus to meet again. Before my departure from their home, at the end of the second CE, Antonio and Marco asked me to host the third and fourth meetings in the arts studio.

Antonio

When I arrived at his house, a farmhouse just outside the town centre, Antonio was waiting for me at the gate, and one of his two dogs ran towards me, he reassured me that the dog was friendly and immediately started asking about the art materials I had in my bag.

Antonio quickly took the bag from me and said, “*so che pesa, te la porto io*”¹⁵ exaggerating his grip to show his strength. Together we entered the kitchen, through the patio doors; his eleven-year-old brother greeted me and said that his mum was in the room next door should I need her assistance. While I laid a plastic sheet on the floor, Antonio started emptying the content of the bag with great care, gathering the art materials on one end of the sheet. The activity was planned to last one hour, from a suggestion made by parents, with a 5-minute replenishment break before the activity with Marco (Antonio’s brother).

Antonio was visibly excited as he arranged paints, brushes and the paper roll, that he placed firmly into position, and asked me what he could draw; I told him he could make anything. He proceeded to fill the pots with paints, mixing these to make new colours, sharing his understanding of secondary and tertiary colour combinations and looking at me to ensure I was observing his activity. During his mark-making Antonio formulated questions to involve me in his work, “*do you live in a house or an apartment?*” “*How many children do you have?*” and importantly he asked “*are you sure I can do anything I like?*” (12.04.2017, first CE).

When observing Antonio, my attempts to take field notes, to record his questions and my observations, were intercepted by new questions, which required both my visual and auditory attention towards Antonio’s activity and his development of a relationship of interest, trust and leadership in the research space (Corsaro, 2018). My attention to his words and art making was important to Antonio, it was something he wanted and, potentially, needed in order to devote to his art making with intent, while monitoring my responsiveness to his actions. On a couple of occasions,

¹⁵ I know it’s heavy, I’ll carry it for you.

Antonio asked “*what are you writing in your notebook?*” so I learnt it was best to jot down key words that I would revisit later, in my own time; so that I could fully engage with Antonio’s work and conversation. Antonio planned his activity conscientiously, from wearing ‘art clothes’ to moving in the space to create his compositions by adopting a different position around his materials and asking me to sit with him accordingly (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Antonio painting a garden. 12.04.2017

Antonio’s imagery was characterised by painted (and symbolic) borders, which he used to separate his art from the subsequent work on the same paper sheet. Antonio always initiated his creative activity by involving me in verbal interactions by sharing his interests, like running in the fields near his home and climbing trees (despite his parents’ fear). Antonio’s conversation appeared to lead his focus and energy and, at the time, he seemed to pay little attention to the use of the art materials. Yet, examining the photographs of his activity, after the encounters, I found that the images Antonio painted are not only representative of skilful intentionality they are

also symbolically rich and aesthetically informed, by the considerate and attentive application of materials and choice of themes (Figure 7).



Figure 7. *“This is an explosive peace sign, I used charcoal for the sparks”*. 12.05.2017

Mark-making appeared to give Antonio the impetus to reflect on the difficulties he had in establishing his status in school, while concurrently reassuring me that *“one of the support teachers is very kind but everyone else doesn’t like me or Marco”*.

“Oggi Tore ha rovesciato una sedia e quando la maestra è tornata ha dato la colpa a me e Marco. Ci danno sempre la colpa”

Today Tore flipped a chair and when the teacher came back she blamed me and Marco. We always get the blame.

(Antonio, 12.05.2017)

In his accounts, a comparison of adults’ behaviour towards his peers prevailed. In line with Rogoff (1996) and Corsaro (2018), it became clear that previous

experiences stored in Antonio's memory extended to his expectations of adults and primed his attempts to participate like and with others, while expressly identifying similarities in the conditions he shared with his brother in the school community.

Marco

Marco began each CE by telling me he was keen to start, gathering materials while explaining his plans for what he wanted to draw. The ritual of drawing his family was important to Marco, he commented as he started to draw "*i maschi*" (the males) first, his siblings and his dad, and then "*le femmine*" (the females, his mum and two sisters), he counted the members of each 'category' as he added identical figures to his picture. Marco's drawings of the human figure were distinctive, premeditated; and when I asked him to explain his choice of colours (having met his family members) he explained: "*all guys have brown hair and all females have yellow hair*" (Figure 8).



Figure 8. "*The males in my family*". 19.04.2017

Marco spoke about himself as he worked, making detailed images while a descriptive narrative supported and characterised his activity, each time we met. *“I have a girlfriend she is in first elementary, I am drawing her now”* (Figure 9).



Figure 9. “My girlfriend, her scooter and me and a basket of strawberries, like the ones at the village fete”. 28.04.2017

Paolo

Paolo is ten and the eldest of two boys¹⁶, he is affectionate and warm in his disposition but these characteristics appeared to be conditional to his perception of trust towards adults and peers alike. Paolo and his family live in a small apartment and, with this in mind, his parents suggested it would be more practical to carry out the creative activities in the arts studio. Paolo's CE occurred on consecutive Saturdays. I met Paolo at his aunt's house, where he and his younger brother spent every weekend. As planned by Paolo and his parents, Paolo and I walked together to the studio (10 minutes). Each time Paolo spontaneously linked arms with me and the journey was silent; I can only guess that Paolo was gathering his thoughts of what

¹⁶ Both children have a diagnosis of autism and are participants in the study

might happen in the activity and seemed happy in his silence, so I felt obliged to take part in it.

When we arrived at the studio, Paolo drank some juice and was ready to get started although he appeared to be unsure of what the set-up invited him to do. This was possibly due the unfamiliar environment while also signalling a lack of opportunity to make art, which school practitioners and parents had made clear from the outset (I will discuss this issue in the analysis on children's creative capital).

At the start of the first session (08.04.2017), after Paolo had a general look over the available materials, I gave him the assent form and explained how he could express his choice to take part; he made a cross with confidence on the form and read it: "*Si!*" (yes!). I showed Paolo he could take off his shoes and expressing a strong sense of readiness he told me not to worry about them, "*non ti preoccupare Franci*¹⁷". Paolo proceeded to inspect the materials available. The activity started at 6pm (and lasted one hour and forty minutes). The first thing that Paolo said as he gathered the materials he wanted to use was "*Fran-ci che figata!*" a popular/slang phrase used by teenagers to express excitement. Given Paolo's age and verbal timidity, it was unexpected but a clear indication of Paolo's eagerness to use the materials and tools available to him.

Paolo told me he was about to make a banner, so I offered him the largest piece of paper, he said he was happy with the smaller one he had chosen (appearing overwhelmed by the larger option). He chose and gathered the paint bottles and pots, showed some initial difficulty in pouring but persevered; had a final look at his materials and began. A few minutes into the activity, which had proceeded in silence,

¹⁷ This shortening of my name 'Franci' (and '*Fra*' used in other instances) can be seen as a significant sign of confidence and trust

Paolo said: “*I did well in the rehearsal*”, I congratulated him and waited for Paolo to explain further, Paolo spoke about his love for music and, for the rest of the activity, shared his passion for Formula 1. Paolo appeared thrilled by his detailed knowledge of his favourite sport. Paolo’s language was together elaborate and expressive of genuine insight and importantly demonstrated a sense of loyalty towards his favourite driver: Lewis Hamilton (Figure 10).

Paolo’s “*striscioni*” (banners), a name he chose for his first series of artworks, are an elaborate composition of phrases to celebrate Lewis Hamilton, whom he described as an ‘extraordinary guy’, summarising the ‘qualities, humanity and personality’ of his favourite driver, thanking him for his victories (Figure 11, p.213).

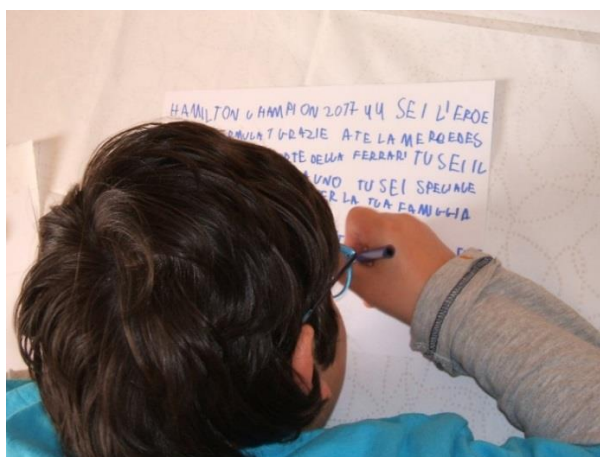


Figure 10. Paolo making his “*Primo Striscione per Lewis Hamilton*”¹⁸. 08.04.2017

Paolo shared his passion for Formula 1, taking great care in expressing his views in pictorial letter-like banners for Lewis Hamilton, adding emphasis with hand gestures, throughout the mark-making activity, to demonstrate the significant personal and emotive admiration he feels towards Hamilton. This was evident in each creative activity in which Paolo interacted with me recounting successful and less successful

¹⁸ First Banner for L.H.

competitions involving the F1 driver, becoming increasingly vocal, explicit, underlining a connection between the driver's bravery and luck.

Paolo led the activity with confidence, while providing updates spanning Formula 1 news and views (always positive) of the creative work and my company, *"a te piace ascoltare"* (you like listening). Interestingly, when I gave feedback to his dad, on Paolo's enjoyment of the activities during the first interview, he responded by saying *"as you know Paolo doesn't talk much, but he has said he really enjoys art"* (09.04.2017). Paolo's verbal openness and the contrasting perception of his disposition towards others were consistent with the expectations and presuppositions expressed by other children, and in the views of some parents and teachers.

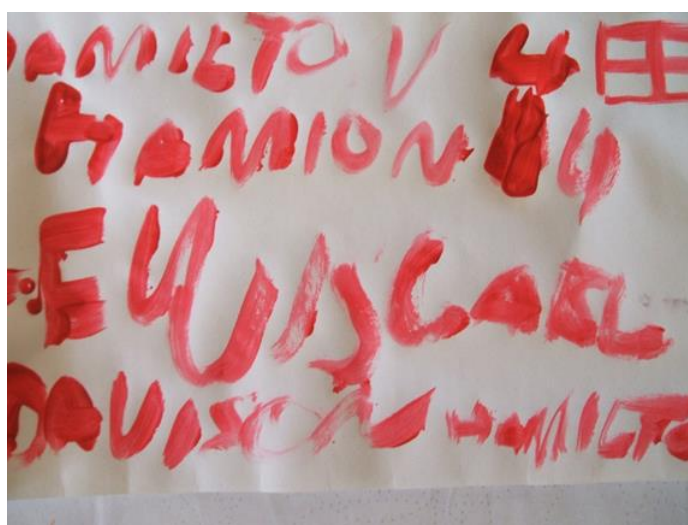


Figure 11. *"Secondo Striscione per Lewis Hamilton"*, detail. 08.04.2017

During subsequent CE, Paolo demonstrated dexterity and confidence in handling tools and moving in the available space with greater physical agility, as well as increased freedom in his mark-making choices, developing the textual nature of his 'banner art' into abstraction (Figure 12, p.214).



Figure 12. “Marrone e Bianco”¹⁹. Tempera on paper (110cm x 80cm). 22.04.2017

Andrea

Andrea is ten and in his final year of primary school, he is of small build particularly next to his peers and his younger brother (whom I met on my first visit to the family home), this detail became significant in his expressive choices and movements during the creative sessions. Andrea’s diagnosis (‘Autism and hyperactivity’ the description used in his medical records), like similar examples in Davies (2018), was instigated by a teacher and determined following “behavioural difficulties experienced *by the teacher* in preschool”, detailed in these terms by his mother in the first interview (participant’s emphasis, 31.03.2017)²⁰.

Andrea came to the arts studio every Thursday (for four consecutive weeks) accompanied by his mum. They arrived after half past four, after school, a time in which it is customary to have *merenda*, an afternoon snack. His mum suggested that

¹⁹ Brown and White

²⁰ Examined in more detail in Chapter 7

Andrea would welcome a snack at this time and it would be a good way to begin each meet-up; so, the creative encounters began with our merenda.

When Andrea arrived for the first session (06.04.2017) he quickly ‘accepted’ a kiss from his mum, he said goodbye, and his mum nodded and smiled reassuringly as she left, having previously agreed to be on ‘stand-by’ in the nearby public garden. I invited Andrea in for his snack and he looked up at me seemingly unsure of what this visit might entail. I had prepared a pastry and a carton of juice on the kitchen table. Andrea spotted a notepad and pen on the table, and as he started to eat he asked me which cartoons I liked, then he told me about his favourite cartoons, and as I did not recognise the characters he described, he stretched across to take the notepad and illustrated his and his brother’s favourite cartoon characters. Andrea effectively started his creative activity during snack time (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Andrea’s and his brother’s favourite cartoon characters. 06.04.2017

Andrea had swiftly taught me something about himself and his interactions revealed an interest in the creative materials and in the studio.

I prepared a long sheet of paper on the floor, then Andrea took the paper roll from the resources table and added another strip, doubling the available surface (now 200cm x 60cm); he began pouring then mixing a range of colours in pots, and focused on this

activity for a significant time. This process engaged Andrea's resourcefulness, as he skilfully blended different colours to add intensity to each mixture. Before Andrea started painting, I helped him fix the short edges of the paper to the floor with tape. Andrea made broad and energetic marks on the paper with large brushes, inviting me to find shapes within his designs and sharing his own evolving discoveries. Andrea asked me to photograph his art, then replenished his paint pots and started mixing colours with increasing confidence. Andrea occasionally peered over to check my reaction. He was propelling speckles of paint as he mixed the colours vigorously (see, Figures 58 and 59, p.267-268). Andrea appeared surprised by my quiet complicity that I communicated by smiling and observing, to reassure him that all his movements and actions were legitimate in this space (Rubin, 2005). His activity involved alternating moments of absolute focus in his self-discovery with large movements across the floor, as he changed his position by climbing over the paper, stopping to assess his view before making marks again (Figure 14).



Figure 14. "Estate" (summer). 20.04.2017

During the successive CE, Andrea continued to share his personal creativity and character in subtle and deliberate requests for interaction through verbal and

nonverbal expressions and cues. Andrea seemed to negotiate and define his expressive space by re-shaping the boundaries that he evoked and established through his proximity to me, sharing a sense of playfulness in the dialogic process that he led. Andrea leapt and made animal sounds; and, as I was keen to show I trusted him, I corresponded his playfulness and curiosity with my own ‘animal-sounds’.

Embodiment in the creative space was a critical communication device for Andrea, as it was in other social settings. In the photo elicitation activities, his teachers and support teacher often referred to his ‘behaviour history’ and the impact it continues to have on his success at negotiating relationships with peers and adults (Ramsey, 1991). Class teachers and his peers had been “*scared of Andrea, at times, due to his temper and behaviour*”, expressed in terms of movement/embodiment, in his “*physical approach to others*” (excerpts from the first interview with Anna, Andrea’s mother, 31.03.2017). The responses to his embodiment in spaces regulated by adults had shaped Andrea’s status and identity over time (since preschool), affecting his relationships with adults and peers (for a further discussion on these, see Chapter 7).

Bourdieu (2010) calls this type of relational conditioning ‘secondary habitus’ developed from interactions in which the demands and dominance of social norms and conventions construct one’s identity and its interrelated functionings. Habitus “captures how we carry within us history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others” (Maton, 2008: 51). Andrea’s habitus became physical and visible in his embodiment, it captured the ways he had become accustomed to the reactivity to his movements, in the construction of his identity and his relations with others, and equally his perseverance was an important act of resistance. Embodiment for Andrea appeared to

have evolved into both a condition and a form of ‘capital’ (Bourdieu, 2010). Adults’ interpretations of these forms of capital can create tensions that determine the quality and nature of participation in social activities, and peer and adult-child relationships, potentially undermining children’s original intent (Ennew, 1994; Mayall, 2015; Vuorisalo and Alanen, 2015).

Andrea’s choice to use embodiment, to develop interactions and dialogue with me, revealed his understanding and appropriation of autonomy in the creative space, so I was determined to offer a different type of reactivity to that of his previous experiences. I wanted to recognise the importance of his spontaneity as ‘capital’ and his willingness to express himself creatively as agency. Andrea appeared, together, surprised and enthused to pursue his practical experiences with the art materials. He enjoyed using the salt-dough we prepared together, in the third and fourth CE, though, occasionally, he returned to the two-dimensional materials during these sessions. He spoke more frequently when modelling the dough and was keen to label what he had made before transforming it, deconstructing it and renaming it according to the shapes that appeared (Figure 15).

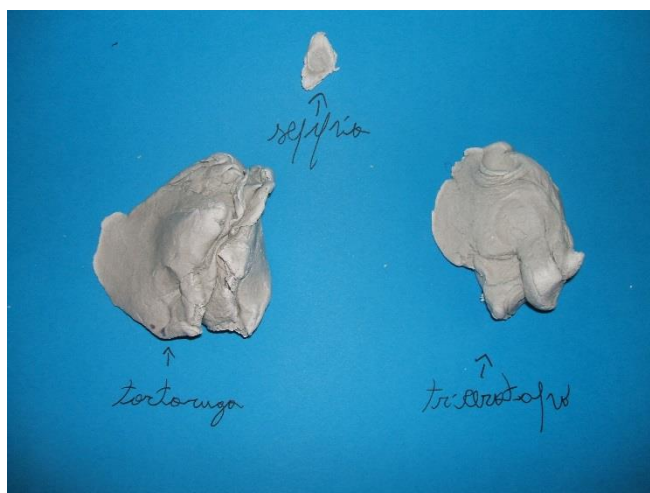


Figure 15. Tortoise, Cuttlefish and Triceratops. Salt-dough. 20.04.2017

Roberto

Roberto is six, and is Paolo's younger brother, he is the youngest member of his class and very popular with his peers. Roberto's parents had asked if he could participate in the study, after realising he reflected the age requirements. They were keen to offer him the opportunity that Paolo had enjoyed thus far, although they emphasised that "*significant differences*" characterise the boys (first interview with Bruno, Roberto's father, 06.04.2017).

Roberto's CE happened every Friday after school. His parents asked me to collect Roberto from school and walk to the studio together, thus validating a sense of trust that may have derived from the collaboration already established with Roberto's brother Paolo. Roberto liked to ask about my pets in our walk from the school to the studio; his speech required me to be attentive to his language pattern and I gradually became accustomed to his sounds and composition. As soon as we arrived, Roberto appeared to be absorbed in the creative environment always keen to start and to use new and familiar materials. Each time, Roberto prepared his paint pots and described his colour choices by referring to an animal's appearance "*arancione tigre*" (tiger orange) (Figure 16, on the next page). Roberto sang as he painted, some words indistinguishable, yet this type of improvisation conveyed a definitive sense of intent, narrative and purpose, a product and articulation of meaning-making in the research act (Norris, 2011; Leavy, 2015).



Figure 16. “Tigre”. Song, movement, and tempera on paper. 14.04.2017

During the first session (14.04.2017), Roberto made art without pause for 55 minutes and following his visual and material activity, he sang for 20 minutes looking at his painting; when he stopped, he looked at me and asked “*ma il vento è un animale?*” (is the wind an animal?). Roberto’s interest in animals and questions on their habits became the leading thread of his art activity. He enjoyed painting and embodying his favourite animals while mark-making; ‘transforming’ himself by painting his arms and involving me in guessing who he had become each time, “*e ora chi sono?*” (and now who am I?) (Figure 17).



Figure 17. “E ora chi sono?” Improvisation. 05.05.2017

Fabio

Fabio is eight and lives at home with his mum and dad and his dog T. The first CE with Fabio took place in his home (18.04.2017), both parents were in the room while I prepared the space for Fabio and they stayed to observe the activity. This occurred without any previous arrangement and I felt unsure about asking them to leave, after all, I was a guest in their home so I focused on Fabio and his inquisitive activity as it unfolded. While Fabio and I sat on the floor his parents sat on the sofa, Fabio was so engrossed in touching the paints, brushes and sponges that he appeared not to be distracted by their presence and I followed his lead. His materials included a tub of cooked spaghetti that I had prepared because his mum had recommended that Fabio might be more likely to play with familiar objects and textures, rather than ‘formal mark-making tools’, suggesting paints were largely unknown to him.

Fabio’s parents were occasionally compelled to gasp, interpreting the activity as “messy” and assigning a meaning or style to Fabio’s marks and gestures. “*Stai facendo gli spaghetti al nero di seppia?*” (are you making cuttlefish-ink spaghetti?) Fabio’s dad asked, referencing a local delicacy. Fabio continued intently without interrupting his actions to respond, he persevered with his discoveries of colours, textures and scents. Fabio showed increasing confidence in his interactions with tools and tested the resistance of different materials, like the cooked spaghetti, which he stretched, bathed in paint and arranged on the paper (Figure 18, on the next page).



Figure 18. Cooked spaghetti, tempera and lavender on paper. Detail. 18.04.2017

Fabio used sponges and made dots rhythmically, then focused on a detail of his 'scroll' and exclaimed "*Guarda, è Topolino!*" (Look, it's Mickey Mouse!), (Figure 19). At the end of the first session, Fabio's mother spoke of how impressed she was by the scale of Fabio's art and his confidence in a new and unusual activity (Figure 20, p.223), "*è stato bravissimo*" (he was brilliant). She expressed her gratitude, and decided it would be better for the forthcoming activities to take place in the studio, explaining this would entail having fewer familiar distractions.



Figure 19. "*Guarda, è Topolino!*" 18.04.2017



Figure 20. Fabio's mixed media 'scroll' (190cm x 40cm). 18.04.2017

Fabio, his mum and dad, arrived at the studio and came into the room that I prepared for the activity (second CE, 25.04.2017). Fabio studied the space (not necessarily the art materials) then left to explore the other rooms; his mum ran closely behind him seemingly overwhelmed and visibly embarrassed, I reassured her this was fine. When Fabio returned he stood by the art materials and discovered a stack of newspapers (ready for potential cutting and sticking, activities that had been recommended by Fabio's parents). These were English newspapers and when Fabio realised he became absorbed in reading the titles and adverts written in his "*favourite language*". Fabio's parents decided it would be preferable for Fabio to work alone with me, and left, as he proceeded to look through the papers. Fabio explored the papers and his surroundings for the entire activity (1hr, 10'); he appeared relaxed and

inquisitive, occasionally emerging from his reading to ask if I had ever been to the shops advertised on the pages.

Like other parents, Fabio's parents had placed a significant level of trust on me and on trialling the creative activities and environment. There was an evident connection between children's autonomy, relaxed behaviour, and parents' disposition towards the research activities. Fabio's lead and engagement in the creative environment was corresponded by his mother's feedback (SMS messages excerpt, 25.04.2017).

“Francesca, non ci crederai ma ti pensavo! Pensavo che Fabio è uscito da casa tua completamente regolato, chiacchierone e felice...mi ha detto che si è divertito, ma non solo le sue parole, anche il suo corpo lo dimostrava! Se tu fossi qui potresti fare miracoli con Fabio! Pensaci! Grazie di tutto!”

Francesca, you will not believe it but I was thinking about you! I thought that Fabio came out of your house completely regulated, talkative and happy ... he told me that he had fun, but not only his words, even his body showed it! If you were here you could do wonders with Fabio! Think about it! Thanks for everything!

(Mara, Fabio's mother, 25.04.2017)

On the last session, having expressed this wish during the previous encounter, Fabio brought his entire collection of (over forty) soft toys to the studio. Fabio had decided to share a significant part of his private identity with me, *“the toys have never left the house before”* (Fabio, 09.05.2017). Fabio symbolically and concretely transferred his private agency to the shared interactions with me, in the creative environment, with intent. This had been corresponded by his mother's support in helping to pack the toys into the *“largest shopping bag we have”* (Fabio).

As explored in Corsaro's observations of children's cultures (2018), the 'enduring' and 'real experiences' that are represented in children's fantasy play, carry significant

references to “real-life rules” and values, through the behaviour of imaginary characters (*ibid*, 2018: 186).

Fabio asked if he could photograph the toys and, when I agreed, he proceeded to make ‘installations’ with other objects found in the studio, including DVDs, and then used the camera to photograph the ‘compositions’ he had carefully elaborated. One example was the installation that Fabio entitled “*Personaggi coraggiosi*” (brave characters). The composition included a selection of ‘brave toys’ and a *007 DVD* (Figure 21). Fabio appeared delighted as he involved me in the role-play activities that he planned and captured.



Figure 21. “*Personaggi coraggiosi*”. Installation. 09.05.2017

Luigi

Luigi is nine and lives with his mum; together they decided that they would host the CE in their apartment. Luigi organised the materials and helped with setting up the space each time. Through his gestures and his comments it was clear that he was together familiar with art materials and knowledgeable about famous artists. Luigi’s

technique demonstrated intent, spontaneity and playfulness. My role of observing his activity, the planning and realisation of his artworks, was a part of our meetings that Luigi expressly enjoyed. Luigi paid great attention to the layout of the art materials, fixing the roll of paper on the kitchen floor and moving around it to make art; his seemingly angular posture did not concern him, nor limit his laborious activity. He started each new painting by making a border, to define his first and subsequent work on the long paper strip, and then playfully signed each painting with his first name and the surname of a famous artist depending on the subject or technique he had adopted.

He engaged me in this activity by regularly asking what I thought about his paintings and whether I had seen the “*real ones*” he replicated from memory. Sharing his knowledge was a significant way for Luigi to establish himself in the creative space and finding reciprocity and recognition in a dialogue on his expertise, his ‘cultural capital’ in Bourdieusian terms. Luigi associated each of the artworks he made, or techniques he used, with famous paintings “*qui faccio le righette come Van Gogh*” (here I’ll make the little lines like Van Gogh) (Figure 22).



Figure 22. “*Righette come Van Gogh*”. Detail. 22.04.2017

The reassurance of my verbal feedback distinguished the CE with Luigi, it was fascinating to observe his interactions, the way he organised his space and how he took ownership of the context, inviting me to participate through sustained verbal interaction on personal and art related topics. “*Penso che questo sia ‘L’urlo’, lo conosci?*” (I think this one’s ‘The scream’, do you know it?) (Figure 23).



Figure 23. “L’urlo”. Detail. Tempera on paper. 22.04.2017

The familiarity Luigi established with me meant that he could share personal feelings around issues that mattered to him, like his positive relationship with his dad and the nostalgia towards the days out with both his parents before they separated. Luigi was confident in telling me about his family members, extended family and his dad’s two dogs. These interactions reflected Luigi’s habit of conversing with adults, a

characteristic of his socialisation noted by his mother and his teachers, indicating his ability to interpret and participate in adult-cultures (Corsaro, 2018).

Stefano

Stefano is seven and lives with his mum and dad. Stefano arrived at the studio with his mum, looking shy and potentially unsure about the activity but soon settled to study the available art materials, voicing his surprise that these were available to him to use freely “*davvero, posso?*” (Really, I can?) (22.04.2017).

When his mum left, Stefano introduced himself by describing a recent visit to a dinosaur park; telling me he was very impressed by the collection. As he spoke, he sampled all the materials available making a range of designs on the sheet of paper, progressively using paints then, in turn, oil pastels and charcoal sticks (Figure 24).

Each experimental mark or drawing was supported by his comments and questions and, like some of the other children in the study, he paused to check if he was ‘still’ entitled to “*take more*” paper and colours and try new tools and media.



Figure 24. Stefano sampling different media. 22.04.2017

During the subsequent three CE, Stefano became increasingly more relaxed, his diminishing requests for permission to take and use the resources made room for his enthusiasm to share his knowledge of planets and dinosaurs. Replenishing and testing materials had now become a more liberal and spontaneous activity, demonstrated by his abstract and aesthetically vivacious paintings (Figure 25). Stefano seemed fascinated by the freedom to independently access and replenish resources, as well as their variety, strengthening his creativity and self-expression, thus establishing agency and autonomy in the abstract nature of his art.



Figure 25. “Dipinto²¹”. Watercolour on paper. 13.05.2017

The conversation on dinosaurs, from the first CE, had led Stefano to share his knowledge of the characteristics of different dinosaur species, exceptions, diet and behaviours, so the second time we met I added a fossil to the resources table (the closest ‘thing’ to a dinosaur I had). Stefano was delighted and, coincidentally, he had brought a toy from his own collection to the session (and the sessions after that), creatively introducing me to his own ‘culture’ by contributing to my knowledge of his

²¹ Painting

world in this exchange (Qvortrup, 2009; Corsaro, 2018). Stefano made ‘fossil like’ prints using the salt-dough available, integrating a symbol from his repertoire in what had developed into a shared interest and activity (Figures 26 and 27).



Figure 26. “Capitan America fa un fossile²²”. 17.05.2017



Figure 27. “Fossile”. Salt-dough. 17.05.2017

²² Captain America makes a fossil

6.4 Creative encounters in NW England, negotiating the field

As with the fieldwork conducted in Italy, all encounters in NW England took place at regular intervals, usually on the same day of the week, for four weeks, in the afternoon after school (with one of the children opting for Saturday afternoons). These arrangements were made according to the suggestions made by children and their parents. The fieldwork occurred between September and November 2017, involving eight children (2F, 6M) from five primary schools in the North West. In all sites, school staff collectively exhibited an openly supportive attitude towards the choices expressed by children and parents, by responding with commitment by freeing a space in school as planned in readiness for the scheduled activities. Staff also prepared for my visits in advance; for example via the staff noticeboard or the school bulletin, which helped to coordinate my arrival and the meetings with the children taking part in the study. Parents and staff, at home and in school, contributed to accommodating the creative encounters attentively, taking note of the practical necessities associated with the activities (clear floor space, proximity to a sink, etc.). School staff appeared to give meaningfulness to the activities from the outset, by expressing their interest in my work, the materials I brought to schools, and in their disposition towards me as a creative ‘guest/artist/researcher’ (my role was defined differently in each school). A member of staff (in most cases the SENCo or a teaching assistant) elected to find a suitable place in which I could ‘host’ the encounters, which was consistent each week, where I could make the necessary adjustments and accommodate specific requests, made by children, emerging over the course of the fieldwork. For example, children were particularly expressive, at the end of their art-making activity, with regard to drying and storing their artefacts in a

safe place (Malchiodi, 1998), in the knowledge that the room used for the CE would return to its usual function the following morning.

Requests to this effect occurred naturally, without prompt, and were common across the sample, demonstrating children's sense of ownership of their creative products and, in turn, suggesting children's pride in their personal, material and agentic accomplishments. School staff and parents offered their availability in accordance with the necessary ethical agreements and, in a less formal sense, expressed their commitment to the activities, viewing the CE as an important opportunity for the children involved. One teacher commented: "*it's good for them to have something different that's going to benefit their sense of self*" (29.06.2017). Parents who accommodated the activities in the family home reflected this disposition, helping to plan the creative space, respecting children's boundaries, and preparing a suitable place for storing artefacts and art supplies.

Scott

Scott is ten and the youngest in his family, he has two older sisters that live away from home and he is an uncle; Scott shared these details with me when he introduced himself, the first time we met, when he joined the SENCo and one of his sisters at the 'information and consent' meeting. Scott appeared intrigued by the idea that I had "*chosen*" him to take part, although at this point he was not aware of what the activities could entail. Scott made comments expressing both approval and surprise, associating his exclusion with "*behaviour*"; "*normally they don't pick me, I don't get picked*" (29.06.2017).

Prior to Scott's arrival at the meeting, the SENCo had described Scott by foregrounding "*difficulties mixing with others in his class*", and described his heightened reactivity, "*they provoke him, all the time, with noises they know he reacts badly to, he can be quite difficult*" (SENCo, 29.06.2017). Further, it emerged from the first interview with Scott's mother that Scott was "*aware of a diagnosis*" and had recently been told "*he has autism*" (27.09.2017). Scott however described his ways as 'bad days' using this description, at the start of the CE to share his experience of school and the character of a difficult day.

Scott's CE occurred on Friday afternoons in the nursery classroom; Scott appeared to be immediately familiar with the space, and around me, and he was keen to tell me that the "*young ones use the room in the morning*" and that he had not been at this nursery (in the school) himself. Scott used the floor space, which I prepared with materials, and would occasionally take a chair to sit at a corner of the room and "*take a little break and look*" at his artwork, from a different viewpoint.

From the first CE, Scott's presence in the creative space appeared calm, his tone and movement showed that he was attentive and relaxed, and his comments demonstrated that he anticipated the arrival of Friday afternoons with excitement. Each time we met, Scott would briefly tell me of his day, before talking through the steps of what he had planned to paint, demonstrating with his words and the organisation of the available materials that he was ready and at ease in his intent towards the activity and our time together.

Soon after beginning with a charcoal sketch, on the first CE, Scott talked about his favourite band (Figure 28), “*I haven’t ever told other people I like ACDC but my dad has the tapes*”, he then explained:

“I really love art. This is going to be a portrait of my favourite band ACDC.

This is Angus Young, lead guitarist, he’s pretty much the founder of the band, and he’s dressed like a school boy ever since he started the band. I’m going to do Brian Johnson.

I wish we could do this more than four times.

Here, I’ve done Angus Young swinging his jacket”

(Scott, 08.09.2017)



Figure 28. “Angus Young”. Charcoal and oil pastels. 08.09.2017

Over the course of the fieldwork, it became clear that Scott perceived his musical choice to be atypical by comparison with his peers. As his first comment revealed he had never “*told other people*”, suggesting he may have been criticised. His willingness to share an important detail about his identity was a privilege for me. Scott’s views about ACDC, and his commentaries in the creative setting, showed he was prepared to establish his role in his interactions with me in ways that differed

from his habitual position in the class-group. His teachers had also assumed that Scott had little contact with his father (as discussed during the photo elicitation interviews), but his mention of his dad's tapes, and other similar references that followed, meant that Scott enjoyed a common interest and quality time with his dad. I also believe that in his talk of 'the band', Scott had found an opportunity to reconstruct his identity and his view of being 'different from others' through a cultural lens rather than an ableist or behavioural one. Scott showed confidence and focus in his activity, occasionally (like other children in the study) suggesting his surprise in having limitless access to the art materials that he could use according to his own ideas; when I assured Scott that paints and tools were his, he said, "*I thought you were just letting me borrow them*"²³. Scott talked to me candidly, describing his views about being involved (in the research), speaking throughout his art-making activity, while engrossed in drawing or painting. His focus and his intent were such that I was able to annotate his reflections and comments *verbatim*, and - importantly - without appearing to be less attentive to Scott's views, stories and prompts to interact.

"I had a bad day today.

Before I started this I wasn't that interested in paint. You've inspired me to be interested in paint. I like coming here to paint my arms. I didn't realise people could accidentally make art"

(Scott, 22.09.2017)

Similar to other participants, during the subsequent CE, Scott began to use materials unconventionally, exploring his creative authority overtly, "*if I colour the whole spatula I can make a spatula print*". His activity became more liberal and characterised by experimenting and (self)evaluating. Scott described his visual

²³ Scott was able to take home all remaining materials and tools at the end of the last CE

processes and outcomes, alternating talking about his art making with observations, wishes and plans for the future.

“I want to change school, to get lots of friends so they can be in my band. I’m either going to be a bass player or the lead singer I haven’t decided yet. I’ll drink vodka and coke when I’m older. The only thing I hate about this [research] is that it ends”

(Scott, 22.09.2017)

During the last CE, Scott frequently referred to his enjoyment of the activities and the opportunities these had provided to talk about “[my] *self, interests and dreams*” (Figure 29). Scott asked me to include the following quotes, which he noticed I had annotated in my book.

“When I grow up I’m going to have multiple jobs, I’m going to be an actor, a rock star, a superhero.

Sometimes I make my own breakfast”

Scott continued,

“Eyebrows are the most important part of someone’s face, if you’re sad they go like ‘this’, if you’re angry they go like ‘this’. I don’t care about looks I just care about how I look, I want to have luscious long hair. Being a superhero seems really fun.

Can I write in your book?”

F- “Yes”

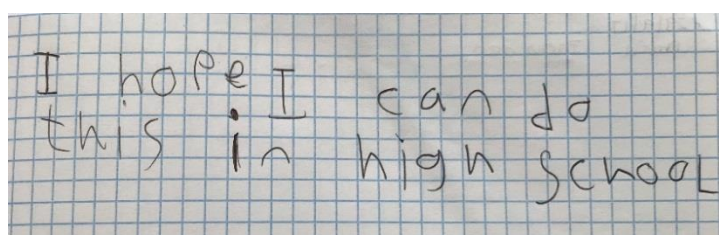
A photograph of a piece of blue-lined graph paper. Handwritten in black ink is the sentence "I hope I can do this in high school". The words are arranged in two lines: "I hope I can do" on the top line and "this in high school" on the bottom line. The handwriting is casual and slightly slanted.

Figure 29. Scott’s contribution to the field notes. 29.09.2017

Susie

Susie is seven and lives with her pet “*budgie*” and her mum and dad, and is the youngest in her family. She has three older brothers and, at the time of the study, Susie’s grandmother lived with the family (Susie would “*check on grandma*” and spoke fondly of her during the CE). When Susie had chosen to take part in the study, she wanted to “*do art at home on Saturday afternoons after Math Club*”. Each time I arrived at her house, Susie would be at the door ready to invite me in and would make comments suggesting that she was eager to start, “*come on, you’re late*”.

Susie helped with preparations, unpacking materials (and storing them in the garage at the end of each activity). After laying out a plastic sheet to cover the carpet in the lounge, which became her arts studio each Saturday afternoon for four weeks, Susie immediately engaged in art making. Her pieces evoked interesting perceptions of the weather and the seaside (Figure 30, p. 238). Susie focused extensively in her painting while occasionally prompting conversations through role-play, telling stories about school, her enjoyment of her teacher’s unusual accent, which she imitated, and sharing other anecdotal facts about “*people from school*”.

“You love art don’t you? I can tell.

I think I’ll make a sunset. Well technically it’s becoming day time. Can I tell you what happens when you mix yellow and blue?”

(Susie, 09.09.2017)



Figure 30. "Sunset". Tempera on paper. 16.09.2017

Through her mark-making and in her speech Susie appeared to be aware of her ways of doing things, in comparison to others, concerned of impending differences while making examples to express her observations of her siblings and her classmates "*being good at things*" (16.09.2017). Such comparisons were the outcomes of Susie's own self-evaluation, as it was clear from my interviews with her parents that they were sensitive around ideas of difference and had not told Susie about the diagnosis.

"I might show you my Math Club bag, I have an enemy at Math Club, she's a big psychopath like me"

(Susie, 16.09.2017)

This was the only occasion in which Susie referred to having an affiliation with a peer, although the essential description was that of "*an enemy*". It was clear that Susie identified a common status in her conceptual alliance "*like me*" and, in doing this, demonstrated she took (structural) differentiation seriously (Rizzo, 1989;

Evaldsson, 1993; Raby, 2010; Corsaro, 2018). Susie explored her identity formation as well as inherently defining a ‘core group’ in which she felt she could not integrate (an idea discussed later in the chapter).

Susie appropriated the creative space with confidence and occasionally asked me if I wanted to paint. She enjoyed asking me to turn away while she painted, so she could “*surprise*” me. When I suggested I would miss seeing her art-making actions, she said, “*here, you can play like this*” as she demonstrated playing with the ornaments and laughed, because “*the rabbit and the turtle kissed*” (Figure 31).



Figure 31. Susie showed me how I could play with the ornaments. 16.09.2017

Having seen Susie in class and with her peers, it was noticeable that she was more spontaneous at home than her ‘school identity’ demonstrated (Rizzo, 1989; Wexler et al., 1992; Wickenden, 2019). During the CE she liked to involve me in role-play and led the narrative surrounding her art making, drifting between self-consciousness, in her descriptions of her abilities and skills, and confidence in her creative intentions and interactions that were punctuated by humour (Figure 32, p.240).



Figure 32. "Look this guy's got a yellow tan like *The Simpsons*". 16.09.2017

Angela

Angela is ten, is an only child and lives at home with her mum and dad, and her "grandma usually collects" her from school. Angela's creative encounters took place on Monday afternoons, after school, in a small room adjacent to the dinner hall. Angela took part in three encounters and chose not to attend our final meeting. On each occasion, Angela was keen to get started showing eagerness in her practical endeavours; she was laborious with the art materials while she detailed her feelings, which permeated her intentionality.

Angela would begin by making an assessment of the available materials and speaking of her day.

Like Scott, Angela was keen for me to take notes and include them in my writing and gave concrete examples to express her feelings, her understanding of self-awareness, and "*the difference*" in how she felt others perceived her, irrespective of her attempts to "*do the right thing*", as one of her examples illustrates (Figure 33, p.241).

"My cousin Frida, everyone thinks she's a celebrity, cos she's always quiet, she's the family's favourite. Are you writing it? [I nodded]

I'm like, what do I have to do to get her celebrity attention?

There, that's the colour I wanted to make! I'm going to draw Frida now. She's going to be holding a notepad and pencil as everyone wants her autograph.

My cousin she just gets all the attention"

(Angela, 11.09.2017).



Figure 33. "Frida with notepad and pencil". Pencil and tempera on paper. 11.09.2017

Angela showed she was aware of the freedom to articulate her views in her creative space and was determined to exert her observations, in vocal and visual expressive acts, and concurrently preserve these in aesthetic form. Angela appeared motivated to share her sense of injustice, expressing her feelings with clarity through critical examples, thus the encounters appeared to be together deterministic and important to Angela. Her openness signified an approach to the creative environment that provided her with the confidence to present her views, including an assessment of the roles of the adults that routinely surrounded Angela at home and at school.

Angela's art was rich in symbolism (Figure 34), and her 'portraits' of family members emphasised her feelings about particular dynamics that she felt excluded her from participating fully and equally.



Figure 34. "I've covered it all but now I'm going to do some spirals". 02.10.2017

Views about school life occupied a more marginal role in her creative process but despite that, when Angela spoke of school she did so with poignancy.

"Can you write this about writing?

When I do my own thing I like it, when it's in school I don't"

(Angela, 02.10.2017)

Akeem

Akeem is seven; he lives at home with his mum and dad, younger brother and baby sister. At the start of the first CE, Akeem prepared himself by rolling-up the sleeves of his school jumper and taking off his shoes, he swiftly circled the assent form and began his creative activity by scrutinising the materials available on the floor.

The CE occurred on Tuesday afternoons in the ‘Explorers’ room, the nursery space attached to his school. Akeem showed an increasing interest and evolving disposition towards the creative process and my company in the space, throughout each session. Akeem used gestures and smiled to communicate, requesting my approval to use and collect the materials he wanted, from the selection laid out according to his preferences. To echo his lead, I adopted nonverbal responses and Akeem looked at me and at the materials then smiled again before collecting what he had planned to use. Akeem showed confidence and energy in his art making, and in his spontaneous gathering of tools and materials that no longer required my silent approval.

Akeem became so industrious in his creative activity that I asked him if I could move his artworks to the free space on the floor, he nodded and continued intently. While energetically mark-making, he looked over at the growing collection of his paintings and exclaimed “*look, I made that!*” (Figure 35, p.244).

As he continued to observe my actions, as I displayed his work, the initial nonverbal exchanges developed from ‘single word’ labels indicating what Akeem had made, “*alphabet, hands*”, to progressively more complex descriptions, “*my favourite colour, red*”, towards the end of the same session (12.09.2017).



Figure 35. Akeem's artworks on display during his first CE. 12.09.2017

When Akeem finished painting, his teaching assistant Mrs M looked through the door to check if the session had ended (as planned) and Akeem proudly guided her, taking her by the hand to the display of his artworks. Together Akeem and Mrs M agreed that the following morning they would collect the pieces, left to dry overnight in the nursery. Mrs M told me this had become a much-enjoyed “*ritual every week*”, and Akeem would come to school earlier than usual on Wednesday mornings to store his art. This process was triggered by Akeem's sense of ownership and agency in the creative activities and beyond in his sharing and storing ritual, in which he engaged his teaching assistant (Malchiodi, 1998; Thomson and Hall, 2008; Connolly, 2017).

During the second CE, I gave Akeem a brief demonstration of a basic printing technique to expand his mark-making repertoire and provide him with a further expressive option beyond hand printing, painting and drawing. He immediately wanted to use the printing idea, replicating each stage of the demonstration and

producing a series of prints while involving me in some of the practical tasks, namely washing and drying the print board. After that Akeem, proactively engaged in a cycle of “*choose paint, pour paint, get paper, print, peel, wash, dry, tissue in the bin*” mimicking joyfully the actions from the demonstration (Figure 36).



Figure 36. “Red Print”. 19.09.2017

Akeem showed growing confidence in his organisational skills, autonomy and motivation. He made prints by pouring paint in the shape of numbers or letters. The generous amount of paint used meant that on making the impressions on paper the original shapes were lost. Akeem responded to this creatively, by announcing “*number three*” followed by “*it looks like... a seal now*”; this became a springboard for my involvement as Akeem would look at me, inviting me to ask “*it looks like..?*” We were both eager to find what would appear and laughed about each other’s perceptions of what the paint revealed to us. Akeem assembled several sheets of sugar paper, with parcel tape, and used the roller, large brushes and his hands to make “*huge paintings*” (Figure 37, p.246). The scale of his art validated Akeem’s progressive awareness of his expressive capital and agentic authority.



Figure 37. “Huge paintings”. Mixed media. 19.05.2017

Matt

Matt is six and has three brothers. During our first meeting, his mother and teachers described his “*difficulties in the Year 1 class*”, which he had recently joined, unanimously. His teachers told me that Matt had often attempted to return to “*his Early Years classroom*” and wanted to go back to play “*with dollies and cars*” (class Teacher, 14.09.2017). These perceptions appeared to dismiss Matt’s agency, withholding any possibility for exploring alternative motives or his discomfort in his current class-group. This tendency persisted in the photo elicitation focus group with Matt’s teachers. Adults’ views focused on Matt’s lack of peer-group friendships, limited language skills and the need for tailored attention in reference to his “*behaviour*”²⁴ (14.09.2017).

²⁴ Excerpts from ‘PE’ data

When I arrived at the school office to meet Matt, his mother (who was there to collect her youngest child) said “*he had a bad day*”, suggesting this may affect the creative activity. Matt and I walked to the Nursery where I had set up his arts studio; I had prepared a large roll of paper fixed to the floor space, bowls, paint and pastels, and a range of mark-making tools. To begin we took off our shoes and Matt picked up the roller he balanced it in a large bowl, which he filled with paint. Matt made the sound of a speeding car as he pushed the roller across the length of the paper sheet: “yellow river” (Figure 38).



Figure 38. “Yellow river”. Tempera on paper (400cm x 90cm). 14.09.2017

Matt enjoyed personifying colours and tools,

“Ok! Come here yellow! Us sponges can do this! Going to make more green. Oh my! I’ll make the sky blue, put this together it makes green”

(Matt, 14.09.2017)

Matt’s creative activity and language became increasingly complex, surpassing the estimations of the adults involved in his daily routines in school. Matt displayed sophisticated relational ideas through play, demonstrating social awareness and creative agency. The research context and the relationship of trust and recognition forged within it appeared to determine Matt’s activity, his playfulness and personal agency (Gribble, 2010; Spyrou, 2011; Connolly, 2017). His art was characterised by intent and self-appreciation in reference to his mark-making, the scale of his physical actions and creative productivity. Matt would survey what he had made and ask for my assistance in moving the artworks that he completed, which I hung on a washing line stretched across the width of the classroom. On one occasion having hung several pieces on the line, I exclaimed, “*look! You’re an artist!*” Matt appeared to be delighted by the feedback, and replied “*look at me, I’m an artist*” before starting to paint again (Figure 39, p.249) and, with a visible sense of urgency, added:

“I’m running out, I made a sky, coming more clouds, painted one cloud, loads of clouds”

(Matt, 28.09.2017)



Figure 39. "Clouds". Movement and tempera on paper. 28.09.2017

Matt enjoyed combining making art and storytelling, creating scenes and role-play and involving me by describing their meaning through the creative acts that brought to life his interests, his enjoyment of his expressive freedom and the possibilities of moving in a dedicated space (Gribble, 2010; Pahl, 2012). At particular stages determined by Matt, he would momentarily leave mark-making to study the toys in the 'activity corners' in the room; returning to the "art area" at his own pace and bringing toys with him. Matt invited the toys to join the activity as "*spectators*" (Figure 40, p.250).



Figure 40. Matt makes an orderly line of ‘toy spectators’ to watch his activity. 28.09.2017

Matt helped to tidy up the materials, and asked “*tell my mummy I put these [away] in orange and green, with spoon and palette*”, demonstrating that he had not only acquired new skills and new vocabulary and used these in context, he also felt it was important to acknowledge his achievements beyond the CE, by asking me to “tell mummy”.

“I’m so clever, make a rainbow, you look at it now and mummy later, then dinner, then bed”

(Matt, 28.09.2017)

On the last CE, Matt made reference to the end of the activities, he gathered the toy figures and prepared for both his creative activity and the ending of our meetings.

“They’re coming to watch me paint. It’s going to be amazing!
You’ll be sad and you’ll miss me? Yes?”
F- “Yes”

(Matt, 16.10.2017)

And, looking across at the toy animals, Matt continued: “*and you? And the sheep?*” Then asked, “*Where my paint already dry?*” showing a purposeful sense of ownership, “personal investment” and accomplishment in the creative activities and artistic products (Malchiodi, 1998: 227).

Luke

Luke is six; he lives with his parents and older sister who attends Year 6 in his school, and has a pet dog. Luke and his parents decided it was best for the CE to take place in the family home, to avoid confusion for “*Luke at the end of the school day, when he gets collected with his sister*” (Luke’s mother, 29.06.2017). Luke told me he was excited that I would visit his house and bring art materials and, above all, “*meet [his] dog*”. Each week, I met Luke, his sister and his parents at the end of the school day and we walked to their house together. At the end of each creative encounter, Luke and one of his parents would take me to the station where Luke enjoyed checking the train arrival times and waving goodbye from the platform.

Luke helped me to prepare the lounge, and as he put it “*transform it*” into an art space. Luke introduced himself by telling me “*I like maths and love trains*”. He showed me an elaborate track, he had built the previous day “*after school before bedtime*”, and his extensive collection of ‘Thomas the Tank’ trains.

Initially, Luke associated his mark-making with knowledge and skills gained in formal settings, for example by referring to his marks as shapes and numbers from “*maths*”. Luke’s creative activity became gradually more spontaneous and his handling of tools, movement in the available space and his visual products, more elaborate each week (Figure 41, p.252).



Figure 41. “Wow look at this roller, it’s like fire”. 10.10.2017

Luke’s affectionate and caring personality emerged in school (in his teachers’ descriptions and in my observations) and during the CE at his home. However, it was difficult to establish how his kind disposition translated into peer relationships, as I was only able to witness ‘structured play’ in my visits to the school, which adults’ organised for Luke and other children who enjoyed playing with trains and tracks. Teachers’ commentaries focused on academic ability and manners rather than social participation; nonetheless, it was clear that all the ‘important’ adults in his life commended Luke for his kindness. His mark-making aligned with his gentle ways, and his commentary demonstrated that he was not accustomed to making art freely, this was demonstrated in his questions on the nature of his work: “*things like this?*” (11.10.2017).

He was most inventive and spontaneous when preparing and mixing salt-dough with paints, blending them vigorously and checking my response. Luke continued to

appear surprised at my disposition to not interfere or interrupt his energetic activity and grateful for my praise of the abstract forms he developed (Figure 42).



Figure 42. "Salt-dough volcano". Salt-dough and acrylic paint. 17.10.2017

Luke's freedom to experiment materialised in the multiple and malleable forms he produced with the salt-dough; and like Matt, he shared his creative achievements with his toys (Figure 43).



Figure 43. "Look, they're watching". 17.10.2017

The final CE took place in school, during school time, so that Luke could take part in the 'Hallowe'en disco' that afternoon. The change of creative venue, and perhaps

Luke's awareness of the end of our meetings, resulted in a more formal attitude towards art making than that experienced in Luke's home. Using a range of mixed media, Luke made a more 'conventional' composition, and described the scene as he added figures and details (Figure 44).

"I made a house, here's me. I'm standing. A tree and clouds and the sky and some rain"

(Luke, 24.10.2017)



Figure 44. "Here's me. I'm standing". Mixed media. 24.10.2017

Chris

Chris is seven and lives with his mum and dad, and his "*budgie Bill*". Bill had been a critical addition to Chris' life, as highlighted by Chris' mother during the first interview, "*Chris had struggled living in a house without animals*" (25.10.2017). Importantly, this was the topic with which Chris introduced himself during the first CE and was translated into a detailed piece of art (Figure 45, p.255), followed by a series of drawings and paintings of wild animals. Chris chose to do "*creative art*" (his own name for our meetings) every Thursday at school, after school. The

activities took place in the school library, which I adapted to use the floor space while Chris helped with the layout of the materials and tools.

“Bill, my budgerigar, lives in a cage. He has toys and a mirror. I’m doing the bars on the cage”

(Chris, 12.10.2017)



Figure 45. “Bill”. Mixed media. 12.10.2017

In his creative process, Chris appeared to have developed a schema that he followed accurately, giving a certain formality to his artistic activity, which he structured in clear steps. First, Chris drew an individual animal using a large lead-only artists’ pencil (which became Chris’ “favourite” medium); he then added texture and specific features and, lastly, he painted over the image using a large brush (Figure 46, p.256). He repeated the process scrupulously for each figure. Chris also enjoyed drawing animals in categories (“farm animals”, “African animals”, etc.), describing their shared habitat and quizzing me about their characteristics. With each image and

series of images came a detailed narrative, which was expressive of Chris' knowledge of animals and his pleasure in sharing such knowledge with me.

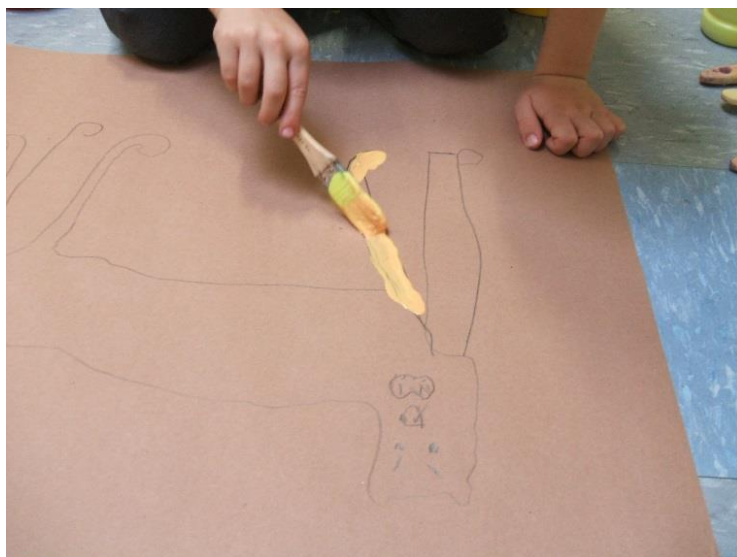


Figure 46. "Lioness". Pencil and acrylic on paper. 25.10.2017

Chris's movement in the space, over the course of the sessions, became more liberal and playful; he occasionally hid behind the bookshelves and played with his socks, involving me in throwing and catching, before returning spontaneously to share his ideas and continuing to make a range of animal figures. Throughout all four sessions, Chris used his passion for animals as a vehicle to involve me and initiate a dialogue to share his extensive vocabulary, which reflected the significance his knowledge had in his self-presentation. Chris asked me questions about animals and talked me through the visible characteristics of certain species as he drew these; at the time of joining the study Chris' favourite animals were "*elephants*" (Figure 47, p.257). It became clear that the extent of his knowledge of animal life had not been revealed to his teachers and was a significant form of 'cultural capital' that Chris recognised, and chose to impart in spaces where he was able to assert his autonomy and agency (Bourdieu, 2005a; Montessori, 2011/1936; Corsaro, 2018).

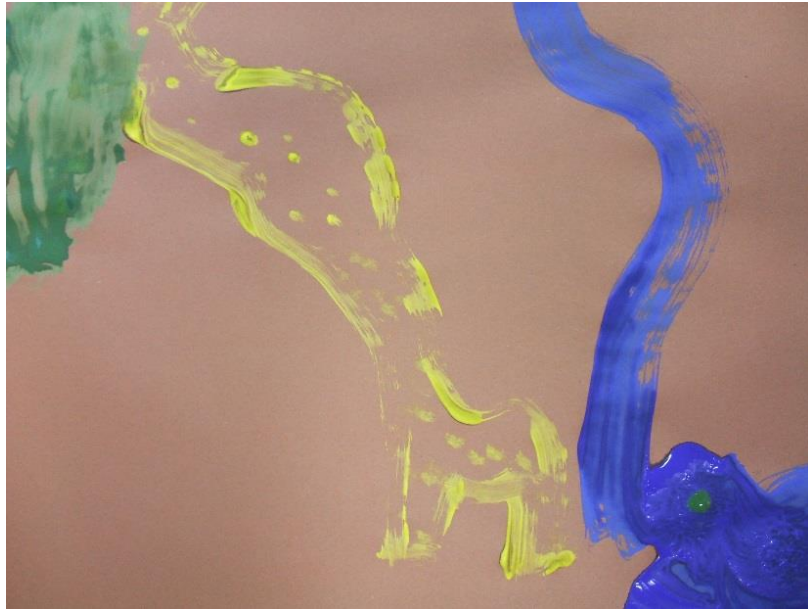


Figure 47. "Elephant and giraffe". Acrylic on paper. 12.10.2017

Chris began to experiment with materials, improvisation and embodiment during the latter part of the third and fourth sessions. Chris' experimental pieces appeared to emphasise his freedom to use his materials and creative space in ways that were unexpected, exhibiting a new sense of authority and autonomy (Busch, 2009; Montessori, 2011; Fels, 2015), in his movements and creative outcomes (Figure 48).



Figure 48. "Experiment". Mixed media. 19.10.2017

Over the course of the fieldwork, and following on from it, Chris acknowledged and pursued his artistic ability by asking his parents to buy him art materials. His parents followed this lead and kept me informed about Chris's developing "*passion for painting and art*".²⁵

Toby

Toby was the final participant to join the research activities. He is six and the youngest in his family, he lives at home with his mum, dad and "*big sister*". Toby arrived at the meeting room, accompanied by his teaching assistant, on Friday afternoons at 2 pm (before the end of the school day), with each CE lasting over one hour and thirty minutes each time. This detail was important to Toby's mum as she had consistently received reports from school staff on the difficulty Toby had in attending to any activity "*for longer than 20 minutes*", which had prompted her to ask teachers to "*release Toby from class, to take part in the creative activities*" (06.10.2017). I set-up the room by moving a large table which became the "*display*" for Toby's artefacts. A range of art materials was prepared on the floor space on one side of the room, away from the table, on a large plastic sheet. Toby's presence in the creative space was powerful; he would circulate the room before establishing himself in the creative acts he led. He imitated rabbits moving along the perimeter of the room and involved me in his role-play, and seemed to enjoy my responses and displayed a trusting approach by sitting next to me, on the floor, when he was ready to begin. The physical appearance of the room defined and encouraged some of the

²⁵ From a meeting with parents post-fieldwork (01.11.2017)

role-play activities that became a part of Toby's creative process and a means by which he gained the momentum to begin mark-making.

It became clear that Toby was manifesting his personality in ways that aligned more closely with the character of his 'private identity' rather than his 'school identity', according to his parents' descriptions and my own observations in class and in the playground at school. Importantly, making art enabled Toby's agency to occupy the space we shared, and his lead and his playful interactions determined the evolving pace of his creative acts. The visual outcomes that Toby produced were only one part of his creative and experiential activities, these provided the foundations for him to create oral stories and adapt props to connect real and imagined objects to narrative, images and meanings.

Toby was fascinated by animals, and after the first CE, he brought some of his animal figures to the sessions. Toby used these in his art work unconventionally and as a way of making new meanings and adding tangible characters to his stories and, in so doing, illustrating and sharing his sophisticated language and knowledge of wild animals (Figures 49 and 50, p.260).

“Tigers are the only felines that can swim, [dipped the figure in paint] he's a panther now!”
(Toby, 20.10.2017)



Figure 49. "He's a panther now". Toy and acrylic paint. 20.10.2017



Figure 50. "I've painted a tiger". 06.10.2017

Toby's narrative increasingly evolved to include his feelings about the creative activities, and Toby incorporated these in the characterisation and descriptions of his art (Figure 51, p.261). For Toby improvisation involved careful movements and dialogue during his creative activity, which ended with gentle singing as I assisted him with wiping his feet and arms.

“This is the best day ever!

What do you think of your new home animals? Painting is fun, I feel better than ever with chalk”

F- “They’re pastels” [whispering]

“Whatever they are. I’ll make a zoo with the pastels, the animals need an enclosure. The animals love living in Paint World, their cage is amazing. My lioness looks like a platypus [whispering], I’ll put it in with the tiger.

Look you’ve got a new partner tiger!

This is the best zoo ever. I definitely love painting. This painting is incredible”

(Toby, 20.10.2017)



Figure 51. “I love stepping on dough with paint. It’s like a pie. A volcano of paint”. Mixed media and improvisation. 20.10.2017

6.5 Analysing children’s perceptions

The creative encounters, drawing on critical pedagogic principles of autonomy and dialogue (Kalff, 1980; Montessori, 2014; Freire, 2018), offer multi-layered accounts of sociological interest that children spontaneously introduced, interpreted and represented in material and symbolic form. The central thread of the analysis evolves

from the interaction between children's internalised dispositions and their perspectives produced in different social fields in which the authority of others (usually adults) prevails. The findings from the creative encounters show that children's identities are at the centre of a continuum of interactions, between social actors situated in different fields, and evolve through opportunities to integrate diverse roles with agency.

The impact of social structures on self-presentation, agency and identity, arising from children's interpretations of *self* and childhood, is analysed by unpacking the situated transactions that involve access to different forms of capital, and habitus, field and doxa (Bourdieu, 2005a). The analysis, in the discussion that follows, examines these transactions and the persistent discourses that invest some social actors with agentic authority while situating others in positions in which agency is conditional to the field and the relationships that are established within it (Gramsci, 1992; Fontana, 2010).

The position an agent occupies on a field creates self-evident rules that determine his potential cruising radius, i.e. the limits of social mobility within a social field.

(Walther, 2014: 9)

Bourdieu's Theory of Practice (1995) "represents a flexible theoretical approach" (Walther, 2014: 8) that makes the mechanisms between social structures and agency, social fields and individual agents, explicit. Examining social interactions and *habitus*, "in the form of permanent dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1993: 86), it is possible to analyse how children construct and exhibit their identities and cultural capital (skills, knowledge and competencies) according to the responsiveness of others in a shared field (Bourdieu, 1993, 2005a; Winter, 2015).

Children's daily experiences denote "that those who dominate the field" have the advantage to determine how it is structured and how it functions (Bourdieu, 1993: 88). Habitus thus can develop into a tendency to maintain "what is comfortable or what is natural" in different fields (Lareau, 2011: 361). It could be argued that children's membership in different fields depends on maintaining the habitus, and this idea is visible in children's aesthetic representations and commentaries and in their 'reading' of the structures defining school and family life. Children are members of different fields, thus their disposition to internalise and reproduce familiar practices (habitus) can vary, offering the potential to challenge 'common sense' routines in conditions that permit the activation of their agency (Gramsci, 1992; Lareau, 2011; Alanen, Booker and Mayall, 2015; Corsaro, 2018). I begin with examining this potential in the form of creative capital.

Agency, social structures and capital

Bourdieu, like Gramsci (1992), recognises that social boundaries control potentialities and self-presentation, producing inequalities that remain unquestioned and propagate through 'common sense' (or doxa), dispositions and discourses that become internalised (habitus) and legitimised in different fields. By acknowledging the production of, and adherence to, social positions, determined by differential power and agency, it is possible to disrupt "the doxa that takes the ordinary order for granted" (Bourdieu, 1985: 734). This possibility provided the impetus to preserve the creative (research) space from any form of adult direction.

Throughout the field activities, children's desire to interact in a context that favoured self-directed representation developed into leadership, in the creative activity,

involving expressions of intentionality, movement and art (Hall, 2015). “Art thereby transcends its former limits, aiming through the research to contribute to thinking and understanding” (Borgdorff, 2011: 44), engaging different forms of civic participation. Children established the vocabulary and parameters of knowledge production; reducing the traditional boundaries of participation, using different “forms of thinking and understanding that are interwoven with artistic practices” (*ibid*). This aspect of the research has methodological and educational interest.

During the first creative encounters, children were initially perplexed at the opportunity to explore physical and material freedom. Children expressed their surprise towards having the space, materials and time to make art, while sharing personal knowledges and views, testing their visual expressive language and their own unconditional expertise.

“Look standing!”

“Made purple”

F- What did you use?

“Red and... blue”

“Never made purple before”

(Exchange with Matt, 21.09.2017)



Figure 52. Matt. “Look standing!” 21.09.2017

From their commentaries through to their embodied experimenting with materials and tools (Figure 52), children shared a lack of opportunity to make art (independently) in school. In some cases, for “*pupils like Paolo*²⁶”, art was omitted from the curriculum (support teacher, 04.04.2017). This omission was considered both reasonable and necessary, justified through a functional discourse that determines where and how agency is exercised in the educational landscape; highlighting that subjects and individuals alike are seen as “excessive if they are not ‘typically’ productive” (Penketh, 2016: 433).

These ableist, “taken-for-granted practices in art education” (Penketh, 2017: 112), emerged across the field activities and appeared to be part of a cultural legacy that from school permeates parents’ expectations and views. Teachers and parents, alike, described making art as an “*unnecessary discipline*” in the scheme of other more salient school subjects and priorities, which they collectively associated with children’s “*essential learning needs and lacunae*” (interview with Laura, mother,

²⁶ Participant’s emphasis

30.03.2017). With the views of parents and school practitioners in unison, children are unlikely to be in a position to subvert this type of hegemonic practice.

As argued by Penketh (2017) “how we create and treat ability in art education is as important, therefore, as recognising how we produce and reproduce disability” (*ibid*, 2017:113). The emphasis on ‘needs and lacunae’ inferred a practical connotation to this perceived-to-be-inevitable form of exclusion, consequently denying children’s creative capital from being activated and witnessed; and, importantly, reducing access to material and tactile experiences with generative agentic potential.

Devaluing opportunities for children to express and employ their interests and expertise, while engaging in independent creative acts, would appear to deflect the possibility of troubling important divisive practices and “master narratives” (Tulloch, 1999: 163), rejecting some of the most basic principles of the children’s rights agenda (Alderson, 2017; Nind, 2018).

“Can I? Can I use all these [art materials]?”

F-Yes, they’re yours.

“You’re so kind, you’re the best teacher in the world!”

F-Thank you, you’re very kind.

“I know”

(Exchange with Luke, 11.10.2017)

While Luke initially associated my presence with that of an educator or instructor (see Malchiodi, 1998: 184, for a similar experience), although I never exercised this role in the creative space, his swift responsiveness and adaptability to self-directed freedom are a clear indication of a largely novel experience to materially experiment with personal purpose in the presence of an adult. Malchiodi’s views (1998) on eliciting personal capacities through art align with Luke’s engagement with self-

presentation. He demonstrated the enjoyment of the opportunity to manifest intent and agency, using colours, tools and movement. His creative activity became a springboard to describe his talents and future aspirations. This included his choice of toys to be “*put on Santa’s letter*” and the desire to “*learn about big trains*” as an adult. Luke was keen to share personal interests and future possibilities, verbally and symbolically, embodying engagement in a process of co-construction by removing any perceivable boundaries between his toys and the art materials in the shared creative space. Luke was able to merge and repurpose new and established cultural symbols in his evolving interpretation of his sense of agency (Figure 53).



Figure 53. “*Look at my Thomas*”. 10.10.2017

In a similar way, Roberto harmonised his personal, internalised, worlds with visible and tactile representations, painting his toys, his symbolic and cultural capital, which he brought to the creative encounters. Roberto used his toys to introduce me to his

peer culture in his talk on other children in the school, articulating in sophisticated ways (albeit unconventional) his role in the group “*playing Super Mario*” (Figure 54).



Figure 54. “*Lo conosci [Super]Mario?*”²⁷ 12.05.2017

Children gave examples (vocal, symbolic, figurative and tactile) of ways of adopting their creative capital in their everyday interactions with peers, through play. Play and cultural expertise appeared to be “communal and egalitarian” vehicles for entering peer cultures (Corsaro, 2018: 233), in the form of ‘sharing toys’ and cultural resources that helped to maintain valued memberships within peer groups.

These opportunities show that children’s creative resourcefulness and cultural capital offer fertile ground to develop social identities, express personal knowledge in the social world of self-directed peer relations and challenge the structures, processes and stereotypes apparent within instructional spaces and discourses propagated by adults in schools.

²⁷ Do you know [Super] Mario?

Observation, comparison and resistance: self and other

In other encounters, in their drawings and talk, many of the children in the study revealed their awareness of being “*different*”, mostly by referring to the ways in which adults behaved around them in comparison to their interactions with other children, in school and in the family. This was in contrast with their ‘artists’ status in the research activities (Thomson and Hall, 2008), which facilitated these articulations.

“Mi prende in giro il mio compagno, però se lo prendo in giro io va dalla maestra e mi mette la nota²⁸”

My classmate he bullies me, but if I bully him he goes to the teacher and she gives me a note.

(Antonio, 28.04.2017)

This example, one of several of a similar nature in both the Italian and English samples, demonstrates that children are critically engaged in insightful interpretations of the interactions occurring in their social fields, and are aware of being the subjects of biases and systems of power in school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1988; Holt, 2007; Clark-Ibáñez, 2008; Corsaro, 2018). Children’s interpretations seemed to define the borderlines of inequality, participation and self-presentation, and their “potential cruising radius” (Walther, 2014: 9).

Children’s capacity to observe others and recognise unjust treatment, however, did not determine opportunities to influence the nature of such interactions nor the right to manifest social agency or challenge adult authority. Children’s attempts to conform, or indeed resist conformity, by organising their actions as a reflection of the

²⁸ This is a written observation/note sent to parents to report on an incident or behavioural concern

behaviour of others, are also critical in defining their identity and their awareness of individual rights and difference.

Alderson's study of children's perceptions of their rights in school (2002) elicited similar responses, illustrating that children live "within contradictions between the simple instructions they heard about how to be good and to trust adults, and their regular experiences which severely challenged these" (*ibid*, 2002: 35). The impact of these contradictions often transpired in the overtly transformative creative acts that engaged children's perceptions of disadvantage and complex peer and intergenerational conflict (Corsaro, 2018).

Angela (10), an only child, was able to openly articulate and comment on her sense of injustice, disadvantage and lone discomfort bounded in her private identity and familial interactions, communicating a strong sense of competitiveness towards other children in the family. Angela's observations of her domestic life, her identity in that sphere and the differential agency amongst family members, were reproduced vividly in her commentary and aesthetic choices (Figure 55).



Figure 55. "My grandma". Charcoal on paper. 18.09.2017

“I’ve been playing with my friends today [excited].
I’m drawing my grandma, she is always sitting in this chair, she’s nice to my cousin [Frida], but she’s always checking on me. I find it very funny.
I asked my grandma if we could do a car-boot-sale with our old toys. I told her ‘why do you keep buying her toys? She doesn’t appreciate that’”

(Angela, 18.09.2017)

Angela’s example shows a strong awareness of her disadvantage and limited agency, which has become her habitus, and demonstrates her understanding that “some individuals, therefore, already possess quantities of relevant capital” (Grenfell & James, 1998: 21) that assists them (consciously or subconsciously) in maintaining their advantageous roles. Concurrently, Angela refuses to conform to the prominent cultural routines, thus expressing a desire to preserve her own moral values. The energy invested in the transformation of her “*grandma’s*” portrait (Figure 56, p.272) invigorated her oral interpretation of the persistent and adverse differential routines affecting her peer relationships in the family, although her views in reality “most often remain in their implicit state” (Bourdieu, 1995: 19). Whilst painting and drawing, other children described the numerous and diverse strategies used to blend in, demonstrating conscious and instrumental attempts to be “*good*” but continuing to feel unnoticed and “*lonely*” (Angela).



Figure 56. "My grandma". Charcoal and acrylic on paper. 18.09.2017

Abstraction and symbolic representation

Self-awareness, symbolism and abstraction featured strongly in Susie's (7) artworks and narratives. After executing an energetic composition, which she had clearly visualised and planned with conviction ("*I am going to do a lighthouse now*"), and by posing a critical and revelatory question to me regarding loneliness, Susie brought together symbolism, identity and her 'unconscious' in a skilful juxtaposition (Figure 57).



Figure 57. "This is my lighthouse. Do you ever get lonely Francesca?" 09.09.2017

Like Susie, other children, in both countries, adapted symbolic references in sophisticated and original ways, counteracting assumptions associated with ableist discourse around dis/ability, empathy and relational understanding. Angela and Susie²⁹ gave powerful examples to explain the conditional nature of their identity, uncovering a constant comparison between their own identity and that of their peers. Accordingly, the view of “*not being like other children*” was considered a determining factor affecting relationships and interactions in different fields (Angela). By spontaneously describing the symbols and figures depicted in their art, both Susie and Angela were able to weave meaning into making, revealing their difficulty in identifying their strengths and uniqueness, focusing on difference and deficit.

“I’m in juniors now, I’m seven, I’m in Year 3. I’m good, not bad.

Did you do any art with my brothers before I was born?”

F- No [smiling].

“Have you seen Boss Baby? I have seen the sign with ‘exam’ on.

I’m not old enough to go to college or smart enough”

(Susie, 30.09.2017)

Children’s discourses signal their perception of ‘desirable identities’ that are valued through overt distinctions, favouring some children and not others, their positioning and recognition. Children’s perceptions and interpretations of their social status encompassed adjustments in behaviour and extended to their estimation of intellectual ability relative to their positionality, underlining an ongoing and indefinite comparison with peers, and strategies considered to improve performance and initiate interactions with others, evident in Toby’s example.

²⁹ Both participants in NW England

“If I bumped my head will I get numbers in it and be smart?”

(Toby, 27.10.2017)

The physicality of Toby’s question stunned me, and I struggled to respond. Similar to a therapeutic encounter in Haydon-Laurelut (2016), my silence and my own discomfort with the question prompted greater attention to Toby’s ability and willingness to share his internalised experiences, to value the depth of his interaction and the potential of the “critical frame of power” established in the shared space (*ibid*, 2016: 233). Toby’s ability (and choice) to translate abstraction into ‘physicality’ is a powerful rendition of his personal experience of self-awareness, denoting the importance he attributes to specific skills associated with the strength of others in acquiring such skills. Toby promptly proceeded with organising and pouring paint, suggesting “*we can take a trip to the farm and make some excellent pictures of the animals. And then to the zoo*” (27.10.2017). The contrast in tone and subject matter, in Toby’s contributions, also denotes his desire and ability to re-establish a sense of purpose and balance, in this case, in the creative space. Thus, symbolising willingness to take charge of this (necessary) rebalancing act, not simply by engaging in his practical task but also in taking the opportunity to share his plans to propagate our cooperation by extending ‘future’ creative activities to other spaces.

Similar to therapy-informed environments (Mannay et al., 2017), the creative space provided the context to present significant evaluations of personal perceptions around identity, agency, ability, and one’s own perceived “positioning around these discourses” (Haydon-Laurelut, 2016: 235). Openness to a variety of expressive possibilities and flexibility in my disposition in the encounters also elicited diverse

strategies that children adopted to reframe and contest their perceived distinctions from ‘others’, in the process of revealing their lived experiences.

While the discourses emergent from children’s art making are representative of frustrations and struggles, it is important to note that the development of their art occurred in a serene and purposeful creative act; Kramer (1973) found something quite similar in her extensive work with children using art as therapy. In line with Kramer, the purpose of the creative processes in this study did not “depend on the uncovering of unconscious material” rather it was intended to deepen and foster the “development of a sense of identity” (*ibid*, 1973: xiii).

What is significant is that children’s realisation of freedom, available to them in the creative process, determined that stereotypical drawing habits (Kramer, 1973) featured rarely, and only with some children and at the start of the fieldwork; with most favouring and developing physical and conscious material abstraction leading to important and persuasive acts of identity re-presentation.

When the image appeared on the paper, Andrea emerged from his activity and exclaimed “*è una tartaruga, è bellissima! Sembra di Disney*”³⁰. Andrea was as surprised as he was excited when the creature came into sight on the paper (Figure 58, p.276).

³⁰ It’s a tortoise, it’s beautiful! Looks like Disney’s



Figure 58. "Tortoise" Detail, tempera on paper (200cm x 60cm). 06.04.2017

The figure resounded with Andrea unexpectedly; he was determined to have it captured (on camera) before transform it, by concealing it, to find another image within the paint (Figure 59, p.277). Andrea's experimenting had communicative and assertive promise. He had departed from recognisable figures and 'conservative' mark-making to combine intentional visual abstraction with "the exhilarating experience of body movement" and personal agency (Kramer, 1973: 10). Andrea moved, by climbing over the paper, and played with the tactile quality of the paint adding new colours to the surface.

The transformation appeared to be together destructive and productive, Andrea wanted to preserve the new image that had subsequently materialised by having it video-recorded. He asked me to hover across the sheet, from right to left, while he looked into the small screen of the digital camera. Andrea appeared excited and grateful to see the 'eating action' captured as he had requested.

"I see a large fish eating a shrimp ... can you video the fish eating?"

(Andrea, 06.04.2017)



Figure 59. "Large fish". 06.04.2017

***"Being good"*³¹**

The impending possibility of a 'desirable identity type' arose in children's discourses and embodiment. In many creative encounters, the liberal expressive process developed children's curiosity for claiming and exploring agency, while also alluding at being rebellious in a variety of ways in other contexts, where they had not been successful in attracting the anticipated effects of "*being good*" in an effort to assert their "*like others*" identity (Angela). For some children identity formation appeared to be more problematic in formal contexts, where opportunities to participate in negotiating agency and status were frequently regulated by adults. Children's identities appeared to be inscribed by others and occasionally challenged.

Susie (7) perceived her position as contextually defined, in regards to her public and familial fields, in her presentation of a social and private identity, her 'front-stage' and 'backstage' self (Goffman, 1990; Jenkins, 2014). Susie situated herself on one

³¹ A quote from Susie (7)

hand in relation to school performance, conveying her distinctiveness from her peers in specific tasks, narrating a mixed sense of fatigue, diligence and aspiration and, on the other hand, was keen to express admiration and pride towards her older siblings, in her private field, celebrating their academic advantage: “*they’re really bright you know*”³² (09.09.2018).

As argued by Miron and Lauria (1995), Youdell (2006) and Thomson and Hall (2008), schooling agency and self-presentation, through the production and advancement of ‘legitimate identities’ in instructional practices and discourse, can reject diversity. “In choosing not to take up legitimate ‘ways of being student and doing school’, children form oppositional identities” (Thomson and Hall, 2008: 148). Children’s aesthetic, tangible and relational experiences, in the research space, evoked a re-formulation of their identities and status, by exploring powerful, intentional and self-directed possibilities for self-presentation. The embodied and material abstraction in children’s art captured the subtleties of perceiving the value of desirable behaviours, which children aimed to mimic or perform in their daily interactions. Like Akeem (Figure 60, p.279), other children spoke about their observations of social patterns while experimenting with the art materials and the creative space.

³² Susie’s emphasis



*Figure 60. Akeem mixes paint on a cardboard surface while talking about his TA.
19.09.2017*

Throughout their creative activity, and in considered monologues, children merged ideas about their conduct at home and at school, thus detailing the contrast between their private self and social self (Goffman, 1990), which they overtly associated with mood, choice and values, particularly in reference to “*taking part*”, “*fairness*” and “*being responsible*”.

While planning her activity with determination, Angela wanted to share her views and “*some disappointments*” which she felt there “*was no point telling anyone else*” (11.09.2017); Angela’s assertiveness demonstrated a renewed sense of agency in the creative interactions, in which she positioned me as a non-typical adult (Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). Now in her final year of primary school, Angela told me:

“All this time in this school I’ve been freezing”

(02.10.2017)

This important statement emerged while making an elaborate drawing³³, followed by a prolonged silence during which Angela planned her materials for her next composition (Figure 61). The artistic activity and shared relationality had enabled the expression of a basic need that had been left unchallenged (for years). Her autonomy in the activity gave traction to Angela's agency. Her comment resounded with the frustrations of other children, in their attempts to participate in rendering their identities, experiences and needs visible, including details of their private selves, capabilities and interests, often met with 'common sense' social expectations in contrast with their own. As detailed in Russell (2011), children's acts of resistance can take a variety of visible and covert forms that can result in individual children renegotiating their position or withdrawing from expressing their viewpoints or discomfort. Identities are thus an "endlessly revised accomplishment that depends on very subtle interactional judgements" (MacLure, 2003: 19).

"I am going to draw a dog, I am also going to draw my rabbit, I don't have any more pets, my house is not like a zoo, you know! Don't worry!"

(Angela, 11.09.2017)



Figure 61. "My house is not like a zoo, you know!" 11.09.2017

³³ Figure 34 p.242

Angela's examples show that she is aware that adults' habitual responses exclude her from succeeding at asserting her role. Children's determination to explore different facets of their identity and acts of resistance, while occupying a position in which they could affirm their agency, provides important clues around their ability - not only - to reflect on their status, but also to review their attempts to negotiate their visibility in other social fields.

These examples indicate that children (and adults) are inclined to construct identities as a response to specific behaviours, where 'good behaviour' is associated with a noticeable, valued and desirable identity-type. Such an identity is perceived as worthy of being noticed and acknowledged, thus inducing adults to interact with children within a normalising discourse (Goodley et al. 2016; Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 2018; Watson, 2018). In line with Taylor (2018), it is possible to recognise that like societal attitudes, research re-descriptions can also be reductive, even inaccurate, in representing individuals with dis/ability labels who are often denied substantive means to participate in the articulation of their own identity (Fricker, 2007; Baglieri and Shapiro, 2012; Naseem, 2018).

"They've punished bunny rabbit."*³⁴ *Hegemonic restrictions on identity

The aesthetic data demonstrate that the tendency to reduce interactions and observations to behavioural and ableist discourse can affect the way children formulate and establish their identity, restricting the value and opportunities to exercise their social agency (Gigengack, 2008; Ballett et al., 2011; Baraldi and Iarvese, 2014; Belluigi, 2018). Thus, critical elements of human potential in

³⁴ A quote from Toby

childhood, children's freedoms, independence and personal development are withheld when individuals are assigned a diagnosis of difference (Montessori, 1989; Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2015; Davies, 2018). An example offered by one of the English boys, Toby (6), illustrates this disposition effectively.

Toby's image of the caged rabbit (Figure 62, p.284) functions as an unequivocal interpretation of self-awareness and recognition of punishment for behaviours considered unusual or uncanny; it suggests that in contexts of unequal power that produce dominant identities, in which differences are unexplored or rejected, inequality can inhabit the interactions between children and adults. Moreover, "when the approved identities available in the classroom are highly limited, the narrow range of options excludes many children" (Thomson and Hall, 2008: 148), and thus agency may be noticed but restricted and not framed in a context of participation. The symbolism used in Toby's image is a clear articulation of this 'restriction' and exclusion.

Toby often embodied the role of 'rabbit' as part of a ritual he performed before making art and this provided an entry point into Toby's creative activity and - importantly - his world of interests, knowledge and self-presentation. Toby is of petite build and directly identified with the size and status of the caged rabbit; locating himself as separate from his social group, both symbolically and physically. When Toby handed his picture to me, he added this verbal description "*one of the little ones is in jail for being naughty*", this served as a vehicle for self-identification and an aid to my understanding of a significant memory. This critical interaction and expressive process captures important messages of social and emotive awareness, the

“sense of one’s place” in Goffman’s terms (1990: 728), and importantly represents the ability to evaluate an experience that conveys significant social disparities while occupying a position of authority, thoughtfulness and trust.

The genesis of the image involved Toby’s recognition of his agency in the creative environment, established by adopting material resources and exploring relational opportunities to convey important social messages. The image evokes attention towards the implications and durability of structured relations that determine the location, confinement and reach of one’s agency and identity.

In one of the photo elicitation interviews, his teacher had framed Toby’s habit of impersonating animals with uncertainty, focussing on her explicit attempts to “*stop it, in front of the other children*” (20.10.2017). This reaction shows that adults’ interpretation of children’s communication (and interests) can determine the ways identities are produced and agency exercised in social spaces where children have differential control over their role and status. Toby’s experience was similar to those constructed visually and orally by other children when expressing inequity, distinction and insularity.

These perceptions corresponded with adults’ anxiety towards difference as well as conformity. When I visited Toby’s school other ‘forms’ of role play performed by children (mostly referencing television/internet characters) were accepted, thus suggesting that diversity, personal preferences and even originality are limited, governed by a hegemonic ideal, and their communicative power left untapped (Gramsci, 1992; Luke, 1995; Fairclough, 2010). This disposition is a complex issue that will be explored in relation to adults’ interpretations of children’s communication and ‘difference’ in the next chapter.

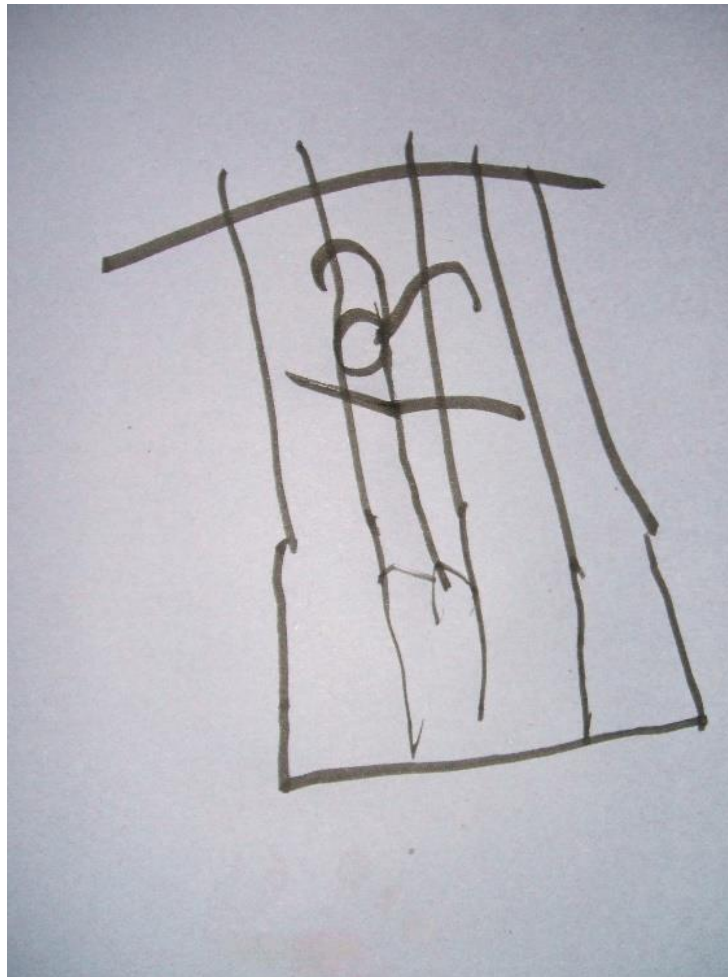


Figure 62. “One of the little ones is in jail for being naughty. They’ve punished bunny rabbit, naughty bunny rabbit”. 27.10.2017

Given Toby’s description, and the symbolism in the image, I felt it was necessary to share it with Toby’s mother at the end of the creative encounter. I did this privately, while Toby walked to the car with his father. Toby’s mother told me that she was aware that at the “*other school*” Toby would often be “*punished and excluded*” from a variety of class activities and “*still recalls his experiences in a sad and emotional way as soon as he’s home from school when he is reminded of this*” (27.10.2017). Toby’s example presents important points for reflection, it illustrates that children experience significant difficulties in asserting their agency, particularly when their

vehicle, or mode, of communication is considered ‘unconventional’ or ‘inappropriate’, deviant from the ‘mainstream’ canon. It would appear that in some instances adults feel bound by the prevailing canon and intervene to change the means through which children attempt to articulate their feelings, ideas and observations. Such an explicit image expresses a past yet persistent occurrence that Toby had an opportunity to re-present in a sophisticated and powerful visual, physical³⁵, verbal and generative interpretation. This process of interpretation indicates that adults, whose observations and responses inform (at least in part) children’s formulation of their identities, can be reductive in their appraisal of children’s intentions while potentially undermining children’s awareness and understanding of difference and marginalisation.

Scholars in the fields of Social Anthropology and Sociology (see Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992; Cote, 1996; Corsaro, 2018) ascribe to the notion of identity as malleable, in constant evolution and negotiation. It appears from my findings that such reactive and interactive processes are interrupted for individuals and groups that are associated with difference through a diagnosis; thus, identity acquires a metaphorical layer that diminishes opportunities to negotiate and re-negotiate personal meanings and internalised perceptions of the self. This is as apparent in the adult-child distinction (Alderson, 2017; Christensen and James, 2017) as it is in the structured hierarchal division between childhoods, and the persistent tendency to affirm a ‘normal’ versus ‘deviant’ discourse in social and research-based narratives (Milton, 2018).

³⁵ The image was drawn on a paper sheet measuring 60cm x 90cm.

Within current hegemonic norms, the notion of the fully independent, neoliberal functional individual, the social agent who is responsible for their actions, has become the ideal to which pathological deviance is contrasted, creating categories of those who can pass as ‘normal’, those who severely struggle to pass and those who cannot (and/or may not wish to).

(*ibid*, 2018: 463)

Different to the desirable identity attached to the ‘functional individual’ the identity of individuals considered to be different becomes less malleable; crystallised in discourses of permanent ‘deviance’. In fact, the identities that are positioned outside the mainstream are subjected to specific social constructs that are seldom re-evaluated and are confined to a secluded demographic domain through ‘othering’ and distinctions that remain unquestioned (Schillmeier, 2006; Milton, 2012). The hegemonic predisposition towards what is felt to be of value, or ‘normal’, and the artificial categorisation of human nature, thus would appear to represent a ‘common sense’ object to which all worthy identities should aspire (Gramsci, 1992; Crehan, 2016).

Children’s interpretations beyond assumptions

The ways children chose to narrate their sense of self and expose the conditioning factors affecting their identity, in the creative process, were equally nuanced and complex. These affirmed the ethical value of employing visual tools to engage with self-expression in self-directed activities, thus producing evocative (and multiple) interpretations of children’s realities from their ‘insider’ perspective (Milton, 2011; Naseem, 2018).

It is possible to note some distinctions in the ways children conveyed their outlooks, the complexities of feeling different (and often self-critical) in their day-to-day, which resonate in both their visual and oral narratives, with common themes such as family and friendship emerging throughout their individual stories.

“Emma is my best friend. Not many people like me, so I was worried about who would be my dance partner in PE³⁶”

(Angela, 02.10.2017)

In this example it is possible to see that like many children, Angela pays attention to the role of a secure friendship and the potential interpersonal conflict she perceives in her peer group, and during PE in particular, in an activity where pairing is left to chance and adult control (Jago et al., 2011). In her interactions in the playground, which I witnessed during my visits to her school, Angela appeared to negotiate her identity through her membership in the peer culture and routines, and her loyalty to her best friend (Corsaro, 2018).

“We have a girls group; the boys are over there if you want to ask them something”

(Angela, 02.10.2017)

In particular, her exchanges and her popularity with other girls benefitted from her connection with her best friend, reflecting gender aggregation and polarity as frequently observed in children’s peer relations in mainstream research (Maccoby, 1999; Bartholomaeus and Souza Senkevics, 2015). Friendship and family discourses appeared frequently in children’s visual and textual narratives, together with expressions indicating the influence of family members in establishing agency, approval and trust. Children’s images and commentaries also conveyed the value of

³⁶ Physical education

human relationships and the exploration of curiosities in these interactions, presenting observations and personal opinions through the creative acts.

Susie had spoken about her grandmother and introduced me to her during our first meeting. Susie appeared interested in her “*nana’s*” health, showing both empathy and intrigue and, as her commentary illustrates, Susie had a powerful understanding of physical deterioration (Malchiodi, 1998). She perceived the possibility of decline and differences in intellectual ability that can be experienced with ageing (amongst other conditions).

“You know nana’s bed? It’s for old ladies, and men, but you’re probably going to get one if you’re not very bright”

(Susie, 16.09.2017)

Susie’s observation challenges the stereotyped assumption often made about children’s ability to express empathy when they have a diagnosis of autism (Milton, 2012). The creative encounters provided the interactional and experiential processes to explore social issues determined by children, disrupting assumptions, dispositions and attitudes that naturalise othering in other spaces (*ibid*).

Children’s visual representations were the outlet for direct and explicit expositions of their own experiences and, in some cases, their activity became the catalyst for expressing views on social matters conveyed through talk and dialogue. The themes emerging from the data offer an opportunity to capture perspectives that signify children’s capacity and interest to observe and construct personal interpretations, through an intersection of different sociological lenses such as friendship, family culture and personal values. Children’s viewpoints denote that experiences of

difference, diversity, gender, local/school cultures and stereotypes can be powerful identifiers for children amongst peers.

Susie and Angela, for example, shared their views from a distinctive position as “girls”, and in so doing asserting a sense of belonging and membership to one of the available - identifying - social groups (Hess, 1990; Golshirazian et al., 2015). Their choice raises important questions on the homogeneity of the representation of children with a diagnosis of dis/ability (in research, education and society). Dis/ability and childhood occupy a distinct social position in mainstream discourse, which appears to normalise the reproduction of formulaic identities in the context of research (Milton, 2012; Denzin and Lincoln, 2013). Children’s sense of authority and agency in the creative encounters (and my non-intrusive/observer position) gave the impetus to unsettle the cultural commodification of autism (Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2016), countering the propensity to foreground the symptoms of a diagnosis, masking diversity and human nature.

Material and aesthetic representation and agency in the research interactions

Children’s tendency to self-reflect and shape their identities and their relationships with others according to social differentiation, therefore, may be more appropriately and ethically understood by bracketing impairment labels, where possible (Milton, 2012; Hodge, 2016; Mallett and Runswick-Cole, 2016). By problematizing the ways children forestall their own ambitions due to discourses that become internalised and enmeshed in their everyday lives, and by following their lead, it is possible to question inequalities that are (first) sociological in nature.

Childhood sociology has progressively challenged segregation amongst children (in their peer cultures and in research) in favour of more complex and multifaceted readings of children's social and interpersonal skills (Corsaro, 2018). Thorne (1993), Goodwin (2006), Thomson and Hall (2008) and Corsaro (2018) support the view that children's self-identifying choices should be analysed through observation, drawing on children's own impressions and interpretations of peer cultures, in activities which "help them to gain control over their lives and further develop a sense of self and identity" (Corsaro, 2018: 233). Thus, it is possible to examine children's identifying choices, which function in important ways, without pre-empting their status through directive and directional practices. The data demonstrate that by co-producing a space in which children lead the 'narrative', without subscribing to questions that classify and frame childhoods according to structured distinctions, reproduced in research and society, it is possible to engage with diverse issues around identity formulation that are not confined to artificial social dichotomies.

The data show all children in the study formulated their identity through a process of self-reflection, comparing their status to that of other children drawing on a personal repertoire of experiences. Children recognise their social and chronologic development, presenting particular moral values, capabilities and talents in their identities (see, Luke's example, p.257). Boys appeared to foreground their identity and interests, with the importance of belonging to a peer group having a less explicit or prominent role in their narratives and imagery. This tendency was consistent in the creative encounters with the boys across the age range (6-10), communication preferences and geo-cultural location, drawing attention to similar gendered experiences from 'mainstream' research on children and childhood (Belle, 1989;

Brown and Gilligan, 1991; Maccoby, 1998; Chu, 2005; Rose and Rudolph, 2006; Underwood, 2007; Corsaro, 2018).

Children's openness and spontaneity in wanting to present their identities, in a creative process of self-discovery, emphasises children's capacity to self-present as well as conscious or subconscious desires to construct a self-made identity contrasting the perceptions maintained and negotiated with adults - in other *fora*. All the children in the study referred to their enjoyment of their creative freedom, through their evolving use of the space and materials in liberal and unconventional ways and in explicit verbal commentaries. Aesthetic self-expression and the immediacy of visual and relational feedback in the creative process fostered children's agency; leading to the production of images and the formulation of social interpretations in textual and tangible form (Cutcher, 2013; Burns, 2014; O'Farrell, 2017), and importantly revealed discursive patterns around identity, agency and resilience (Runswick-Cole, Goodley and Lawthom, 2018).

Whilst this is a small sample (2F, 14M) it poses interesting reflections on assumptions and distinctions around children's identity formation. Moreover, children's observations and dispositions appear to go undetected (in the literature) when dis/ability is used as an identifying factor/signifier (Wickenden, 2011), foreclosing the representation of nuanced perspectives that can be evoked if children are positioned as authoritative in research (despite the social distinctions that permeate their childhood). These considerations attest the value of using creativity and abstraction to solicit personal views (in research) and the rarity of similar opportunities to explore issues of identity at home and in school (Alvesson and

Willmott, 2002; Thomson and Hall, 2008; Alerby, 2015; Penketh, 2016; Alderson, 2017).

Talents and aspirations

The physical and the relational conditions of the creative space triggered representational developments of personal (and sociological) significance; and in their dynamic interactions, children made evident their aspirations and hopes. Throughout the study, and across sites, it also became clear that particular talents and interests, observed in the creative encounters, had yet to be exposed to parents and school practitioners.

There is little doubt that some children felt discouraged to reveal their strengths because they had to “*only do the things teachers tell you to do*” (Angela). The discrimination between personal strengths and convention emerged frequently in children’s creative processes, attached to both intellectual capacities and the ability to engage in social interactions with peers, in ways deemed to be socially acceptable and desirable (Wexler et al., 1992; Miron and Lauria, 1995; Gillbourn and Youdell, 2000; Milton, 2012; Corsaro, 2018).

A number of boys in the study displayed a strong interest in animals and constructed complex sentences to describe them, opposing teachers’ views on having “*limited speech*” (class teacher, Central Italy). Children were able to share their knowledge of animals, using sophisticated vocabulary even when engaged in a creative process in which the subject matter of their art differed. Toby was one of the children who enjoyed sharing his knowledge of “*felines and other predators*” while painting and making small installations with found materials and small toys. Toby engaged me in

his thorough knowledge of animal welfare; this topic offered a window into his ability to empathise with others, to appreciate sophisticated social issues and relational aspects between ‘man’ and wildlife, and between environment and habitat preservation. Toby and other children, like Chris (NW England), Roberto and Stefano (Central Italy), were able to reveal their passion for animals using a form of cultural capital they had acquired in their own time, thus exploring and sharing their expertise in an environment that respected their agency (Bourdieu, 1973; Dumais, 2002). The creative acts provided a space for knowledge exchange and the actualisation of personal resourcefulness, dispelling the power distinctions that characterise other environments shared with adults (Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017; Thomas, 2017; Corsaro, 2018).

Children also discussed issues of social awareness articulated through expressions of altruism, challenging assumptions often made around characterisations of autism, such as a perceived lack of interest in friendship and awareness of relational skills (Milton, 2012). Children’s disposition in the creative encounters contrasted their social/public habitus.

Toby’s habitus had determined his limited interactions with peers in school; he was described by his teaching assistant as “*a bit of a loner*” who “*doesn’t really care about getting involved with the other children*”, and “*doesn’t really say much*” (11.09.2017). Toby challenged this view, during the creative encounters, in his altruistic plans to involve others and “*build a place where all the children could work*” (Figure 63, p.294). Experiences such as Toby’s demonstrate that children (like

all social agents) have multiple identities, which are moulded, revisited and subjected to the perspectives of others and the self in different fields (Stern, 2015).

“I want to have a zoo and give the other children a place to work”

(Toby, 27.10.2017)



Figure 63. Toby. “The zoo”. Mixed media and found objects. 27.10.2017

Children’s perceptions of adults and the research(er)

Children’s views of the adults in their lives, in care and educational roles, revealed that children’s personal values ripple beyond geo-cultural borders, exemplifying perceptions and persistent discourses embedded in wider social phenomena. As suggested by Goffman (1990), individuals place emphasis on certain aspects of their identity in response to others’ roles and particular social situations. Moreover, the creative activities lent accessible opportunities to uncover both perceptions of self and responsiveness from others, namely adults in familiar contexts. My findings suggest

that this ‘responsiveness’ can be more problematic for children whose identities are associated with a diagnosis, due to social constructs and common sense associated with autism.

Children, across sites, were identified, literally and metaphorically, as having “*little to say*” by the adults with whom they interact daily in school (class teacher, NW England). Some parents also echoed this perception whilst others championed their children’s boldness to share their views (at home), on their dislike of school or any “*unfair treatment*” in the school context (Molly, mother). In some cases, even when speech was a less prominent vehicle for self-expression, the combination of sound and movement, and the materiality of the spontaneous mark-making, conveyed children’s personal impressions of daily practices, school life and perceptions of differential opportunities and responses.

The research space appeared to resonate with safety and creative freedom, where my presence was reacted to in ways that differed from my observation of children’s interactions with adults in school and in the family (Weber and Mitchell, 1995; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). Children’s manifestations of agency became visual, vocal and performed, in creative, occasionally subversive, ways; disrupting the generational order and status usually assumed by adults in research with children (Mandell, 1991; Thorne, 1993; Mayall, 2008; Thomas, 2017).

Children identified me as complicit, disrupting the boundaries of customary adult-child relations, and interacted with me in ways that demonstrated my attentiveness to their stories was together sustained and received positively, to the extent that meant children accepted me “as one of themselves” (Mayall, 2008: 110). As Chris’ example illustrates and as Mayall (2008) proposes, “under these circumstances, the children

were eager to join in with the research”, seeing me as “a person to whom adverse comments about school could be made” (*ibid*, 2008: 113).

“Can I whisper a secret in your ear?”

F- Yes [uncertain]

“School’s an idiot” [whispering]

(Chris, 12.10.2017)

Children understood the dialogic value of the research encounters in a conceptual and practical sense, in the symbolic and tangible actualisation of agency, and in planning their activity in the creative space, moving fluidly between aesthetic expression, improvisation and reflection (Figure 64).



Figure 64. Chris. “So this is me, my school uniform and my smile, I’m going to have a little break now”. 12.10.2017

The aesthetic data and narratives show that a more egalitarian dialogue in research with children can be achieved, in a context in which the exchange of ideas is visible, tactile and relational, where children can involve the researcher as someone on ‘their side’ (Corsaro, 2018). The ritual of exploring the sensorial quality of materials (in

shared proximity) also provoked the emergence of values, meaningful memories and experiences (Figure 65).



Figure 65. Matt. "Listening the paint". 16.10.2017

Children drew my attention to the poignancy and importance of their viewpoints through the repetition of words, such as “*always*”, “*never*” and “*every day*”, and omitting specific roles attached to “*school*”, demonstrating a clear association between context and the authority of adults invested in a variety of roles in the educational setting (Figure 66).



Figure 66. Scott. "No one's ever let me do this. It feels great". 22.09.2017

Many of the creative encounters developed into powerful monologues that in some cases erupted, in contrast with the serene mark-making process to which children returned to following their rendition of a particular event or series of habitual events. In these instances, children conveyed each story in embodied artistic acts; demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of belonging, othering and adults' roles in school, including empathy towards adults' frustrations and in some cases their resilience.

"You love art don't you?"

F-[smiles]

"My teacher gets tired, she says come on Susie, [shrugs her shoulders and adds with empathy] she just gets tired"

(Susie, 16.09.2017)

During another creative encounter, after making one of his "*experiments*", Chris shared a brief review of his activity; he was keen to talk of his appreciation for my interest in his work, I looked intently at his art making and then he stopped briefly to ask:

"How do your eyes feel?"

F- How do my eyes feel?

"Yes, is your brain complicatus?"

F- What does that mean?

"It probably means you really like something"

(Chris and me, 19.10.2017)

Embodying civic agency

Children conveyed emotional and observational literacies that appeared to have been overlooked or left undiscovered in formal settings. In one of the creative encounters, Paolo used the salt-dough by rolling it on his arms to engage in a complex and

elaborate embodiment. Paolo seemed unhappy, and started moulding the ball of dough in his hands while simultaneously recounting his discontent over a change of carer that had recently happened. Paolo expressed a strong sense of injustice for not being able to explain (successfully), to other adults, that the new carer was “*rude and irresponsible*”³⁷, which, he made very clear, had affected his enjoyment of his ‘afterschool’ activities. In his emotive monologue, Paolo demonstrated not only his active responsiveness to a critical event, but also elaborate ideas about committing to one’s (professional) responsibilities, which he felt must align with personal moral values. In so doing, Paolo chose to express his own civic values in a rich representational embodiment, with intent, clarity and purpose, in narrative and movement (Figure 67). Paolo identified himself as belonging to a collective, a ‘spokesperson’ for other children (perhaps), by pluralising his subjects and verbs.

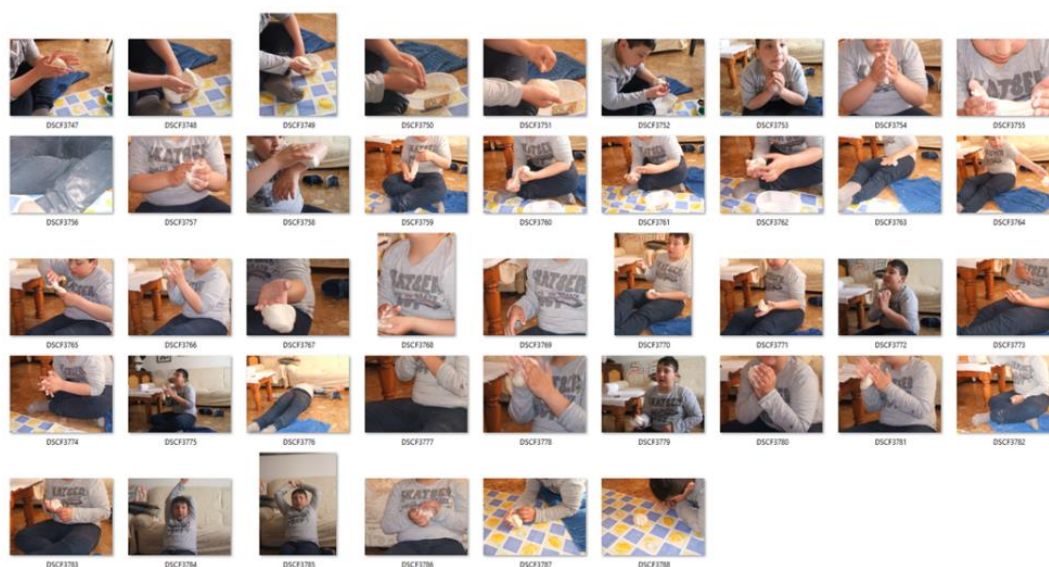


Figure 67. Paolo’s embodied activity. Salt-dough, narrative and movement. 29.04.2017

³⁷ Because of the nature and content of Paolo’s statements, I felt it was critical to ask Paolo if I could audio-record his views, and I shared the statements with his parents that evening

“Se non ci tenete alle cose perché le fate? Non vi stiamo chiedendo chissà che cosa, però fatelo. Forse sarà inutile perché ci sarà sempre gente così. Ci sarà sempre gente che non crede a nulla, in cui non sogna mai, ci sono tante cose. ‘Fra’ non ce n’è persone brave sulla terra, gente santa sulla terra, gente che ti vuole veramente bene”

If you do not care about the things you do, why do you do them? We're not asking you who knows what, but do it. Maybe it's pointless there will always be people like this. There will always be people who do not believe in anything, in which they never dream, there are so many things. Fra³⁸ there are no good people on earth, holy people on earth, people who really love you.

(Paolo, 29.04.2017)

Whilst complex words, concepts and feelings were flowing progressively in Paolo's speech (at times interrupted by increasing stuttering), it was clear that this entire process of communication was as demanding, emotively and physically, as it was necessary. Paolo appeared exhausted, yet he continued his expressive act, determined to convey his feelings and his values in a powerful vocal and embodied rendition of his impressions and views, including references to spirituality, before eventually collecting himself in silence (Figure 68, p.301). This evocative exposition of a critical experience also reflects the evolving relationship of communication and trust that is possible between adult and child even over a short period. Paolo's spontaneous initiation of this important interaction demonstrated he was hopeful in exploring potential solutions in my presence (Malchiodi, 1998).

³⁸ Fra (Francesca)



Figure 68. Paolo using salt-dough. 29.04.2017

The creative space intensified children's ability to express views and values in unprecedented ways, offering dialogic richness to perspectives that appeared to have been obscured by habit. In line with critical art therapy (Huss, 2016), the transformative potential of the creative environment, the physical and relational space for expressive movement, and the sensorial quality of materials enhanced children's communication practices. These conditions provided the agentic mechanisms to engage in "an intense dialogue" between material and intangible meaning "understood by the artist, and not by an external system, power holder, expert" (*ibid*, 2016: 88). Huss, here, suggests that the views of the observer/researcher, therefore, can only ever be a partial interpretation of the artists/children's subjectivities (see also Thomson and Hall, 2008).

The vocal exchanges initiated by children supplemented and informed the interpretation of their subjective views, expressing trust in the research relationship and in my role. The validation of one's own experiences, moral understanding and

subjectivities, thus becomes the result of a respectful correspondence towards children's agentic choices and status (Mayall, 2008; Thomson and Hall, 2008; Burns, 2014; Corsaro, 2018).

Variability in representational opportunities for children

The data provide some vital insights to explore the value of adopting artistic methods in a study that employs aesthetic literacies and critical discourse analytical devices in unison. The political resonance and ethical responsibility of the aesthetic dimension of this work illuminate matters requiring civic attention. Using a visual language accessible by participants, researchers and other stakeholders, can situate common experiences from different geo-cultural environments in dialogue.

Analysing findings as a *corpus* of data has allowed a focused appreciation of individual stories as well as sufficient distance to be able to see the multiple points of contact in which commonalities of experience underline shared values and struggles. The themes lifted in the process of analysis emphasise the political nature of participation (and non-participation) beyond the methodological boundaries of the study, in fields in which (all) children are active in consciously observing and interpreting social interactions that shape their experiences and identity. Opportunities to explore these experiences however are variable, posing questions around social justice, accessibility, equality and quality in our interactions with children.

Children's creative authority in this study contributes to disrupting persistent methodological and sociological presuppositions around participation and knowledge-creation with marginalised individuals and communities. By producing

an environment that supports socially critical creative processes, dialogue and reflexive participation, it is possible to investigate social norms and discourses that emerge from autonomous, non-directive, creative experiences (Huss, 2016). The tactile and literal expressions of self-presentation illuminate the identities of children as a body of social and evolving situated experiences, “identities are formed in the company of others and through culturally inflected ways of thinking, speaking and acting” (Thomson and Hall, 2008: 148).

These considerations help to question ‘common sense’ ideas around children’s ability to contribute to familiar fields (family and school) and knowledge production, and refresh our commitment to children and their capabilities, in various ways, resulting from the validation of autonomy and personal expressive literacies and choices. The analysis has shown that children’s sense of self is activated in spaces that enable freedom and agency. Thus, children’s aesthetic products can trouble persistent discourses (promulgated by adults) that permeate children’s identities, habitus and agency.

The artistic status appropriated by children in the creative encounters was the subject of a translatative act, from reflection to materialisation and aesthetic engagement (Mannay et al., 2017), that exceeded my own expectations. Children’s artistic products, importantly, evoke new questions, interrogate presuppositions tied to capability, and redress methodological assumptions around children’s agentic authority and its representation in research.

6.6 Impact of self-presentation

Children explored their agency by engaging with the visual and tactile realisation of their experiences and interpretations of self, inequalities, strengths, aspirations and hopes. The creative encounters provided the space for children to use artistic tools and personal resources to articulate and explore their views and capabilities in multimodal form.

Different from methodologies that pre-determine the status of children taking part in research, “the open and unforeseeable nature of the creative encounters encouraged a liberal appropriation of expressive (tangible and symbolic) devices” (Bernardi, 2019b). These important ethical conditions enhanced children’s responsiveness to the research environment and their personal resourcefulness, to explore embodied and symbolic forms of agency, repurposing boundaries and capabilities (Malchiodi, 1998; Heeney, 2018; Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2018; Ryan, 2018).

Concurrently, the analysis demonstrates that the creative encounters offered powerful representational and agentic opportunities for children to communicate interpretations of sociological interest. Focussing on the ways children reframed their agentic status and negotiated the relational interactions in the field activities also elicits questions on power relations in the socio-cultural contexts in which the study was conducted (Thomson, 2008; Thomas, 2017; Corsaro, 2018).

By analysing sociological themes emerging from children’s views and aesthetic renditions of experience, I seek to offer an original contribution to knowledge by situating children’s observations at the forefront of the interplay between institutional, familial and societal discourses. Children’s autonomous participation thus can serve

to disrupt the assumptions on children's capacity to interpret human activities and practices of distinction in education and society.

Children's perceptions and appraisals of their social status illustrate their ability to link (structured) distinctions with their opportunity to participate 'like other' members, in different fields, and contribute and articulate their subjective views. Using critical discourse analysis reflects "the nature of the research itself" (Alldred and Burman, 2009: 176). The methods for analysis, like the methods for participation, seek to challenge "prevailing models of language" (*ibid*). The analytic process contributes to opposing "patronising, controlling or colonial attitudes towards those viewed as more primitive, be they children or other (usually non-western, non-European) societies" (Alldred and Burman, 2009: 176). Importantly, I do not claim an overarching representation of children nor that children's accounts are entirely representative, rather I appreciate that these are partial and situated (Wetherell, 1998; Alldred and Burman, 2009) and critical in demonstrating common experiences and capabilities visible through non-directive autonomous activities.

6.7 Childhood and self-discovery

The definition of 'childhood' continues to divide scholars and practitioners in academia and other fields (e.g. education, social justice and the media). For the purpose of this study, and in line with my own pedagogic values, I adopt the term to signify a temporal and experiential period in which children have the right (like other social actors) to exercise agency in a network of social encounters and spaces, and to act and communicate in ways that are autonomous and self-directed. While it can be argued that agentic authority is structured and inequitably accessible, it is important

to recognise that all children are influenced by and contribute to their social worlds (Corsaro, 2018). This notion echoes the principles of a children's rights approach (Alderson, 2001; Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Dixon and Nussbaum, 2012; Wyness, 2018), one that advocates children's ability to forge an alliance between character and identity and emphasises the right to environments in which such an alliance can be manifested as a way of exploring and valuing expressions of lived experience. The transformative evolution of a sociology of childhood and the recognition of the complexity of children's active contribution to societal change (in both children's and adults' cultures) support a meaningful analysis of children's observations (Qvortrup, 1991; Corsaro, 2018). Children's social positions and identities vary according to the practices and discourses that prevail in particular fields, demonstrating reactivity to nuanced influences such as direction and suggestion from different social agents (Bourdieu, 1991; Matthews, 2007). Different modes of self-presentation (aesthetic and textual) thus can be helpful in eliciting and examining children's perceptions of self and other.

Children's identity formation is complex and shaped by multiple forces; these are embodied and transformed in fields in which children encounter different social relations. Through embodied participation and representation, children explored their identity in acts of self-presentation dependent on the possibilities of a liberal and creative context that encouraged agentic intentionality. Bourdieu's *habitus* illuminates these possibilities, "there are acts that a habitus will never produce if it does not encounter a situation in which it can actualise its potentialities" (Bourdieu, 2005a: 295). This became evident in children's appropriation, alteration and renegotiation of boundaries in the creative space. Children's creative autonomy,

movement and intent, symbolically and visually disrupted canons of participation that determine their activity and their contributions to their cultures in other fields. The creative strategies traditionally adopted and validated by artist-researchers, stimulated the conditions for children to embark in self-led representations, interacting with spaces and relationality to establish diverse and tangible agentic possibilities. While performing creativity, children explored interpretations of social relations and the reproduction of privilege and disadvantage within them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

I argue that approaches to ‘data’ collection and analysis that favour literal devices and generalisability in research with children are problematic and often prolong the power differentials between children and adults in other fields. Furthermore, strengths exhibited, recognised and, in some cases, underplayed by children, personal resourcefulness and structural confinement or relativity, can become obscured in the context of directed research (and educational) activities.

The analysis of the photographs and children’s art conveys reactions and dispositions towards social structures, doxa, and interacting societal conditionings, that provoke “a sense of distances, to be marked and kept, respected or expected” (Bourdieu, 1985: 728). It is through the engagement of personal agency, in a dedicated (research) space, that these conditionings can emerge and be disrupted, questioned and examined through authentic participation and critical analysis.

6.8 Chapter conclusion

Children’s experiences cannot be isolated from the perceptions of adults; moreover, the analysis of the aesthetic products suggests that in different contexts systemic

discourses pervade the opportunity to notice, foreground and value children's personal capabilities and individuality, in turn demonstrating that there are significant disparities in relation to personal potential and lived experience. The aesthetic data collected from the creative encounters with children, thus, disrupts prevailing discourses in the views and subjectivities of parents and educators, which require further examination. The analysis of the conversations with the adults involved in the study - in the next chapter - demonstrates that discourses that appear in children's and adults' meaning-making affect their interactions and produce social positions that are internalised and enmeshed in wider societal legacies and ideologies.

Chapter 7

Agentic status and dis/courses of human potential

7.1 Introduction to the chapter

The previous chapter captured children's participation in the research activities and the structures and processes at play in their expressions of agency, self-presentation and identity formation. The analysis has shown that children are invested in their social worlds and engage in processes of critical socio-cultural interpretation from the positions they occupy in various fields. Views and values important to children - emerging from the creative encounters, art and commentaries - express collective and nuanced experiences of agency, identity, ambition and resistance. Children's art offers a sense of how opportunities to self-identify and exercise agency are bound by tensions at the intersection of children's status and prevailing social discourses.

This chapter engages with those discourses and the perceptions of children's identities from the positions occupied by parents and school practitioners, to illustrate the "central importance" of families and teachers in producing a composite view of children's circumstances, relationships and networks (Malaguzzi, 1993: 9; Holt, 2007; Corsaro, 2018). Drawing on emerging themes and discourse (Potter, 1996; MacLure, 2003; Fairclough, 2010; Machin and Mayr, 2012) and on the sociological patterns examined in Bourdieu (1985) and Gramsci (1992), the analysis to follow contributes to understanding parents' and school practitioners' agentic status in relation to the social fields they share with children.

The analysis presents themes that unite experiences situated in different sites, and within sites, demonstrating that structural processes implicated in the construction of children's and adults' roles permeate cultural borders. I begin by describing the process of selecting the data into themes that cascade from familial discourses to school-based practices and their links with socio-political ideologies. Ultimately, the interactions in the study sites provide opportunities to explore the transformative potential of dialogue and civic participation in research.

Using verbatim quotations and excerpts

The accounts analysed here are taken from recordings, transcriptions and field notes from individual interviews with mothers (14), fathers (13), and with both parents (13), plus an additional interview with a single parent; as well as material from the photo elicitation focus groups, 4 in Central Italy (two *per* school cluster) and 10 in NW England (two *per* school). Due to the vast volume of data, the average recording time for each interview and focus group was one hour and twenty minutes, the editorial activity has been challenging in ethical, practical and methodological terms. Much like the aesthetic data in the previous chapter, the complex and evocative material required sensitive participation in the field and careful representation in the editorial activity and thematic analysis. For this purpose I use verbatim excerpts to present participants' views so that these can act as a stimulus in the analysis of the discursive and symbolic practices implicated in constructing agency, participation and identities, offering connections and juxtapositions within fields and across sites (Fielding, 2007; Holt, 2007). As suggested by Crenshaw (1991) these juxtapositions provide a necessarily more complex appreciation of socially constructed realities, at

the intersection of processes affecting children's identity, parenthood and educational practices.

All participants spoke in their respective first language (Italian and English) and to preserve "the value of what they said", verbatim quotations appear in the original language first, followed by the corresponding translation in English (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006: 13). Short excerpts from the interviews are included in English in the main text, weaving significant thoughts into the narrative. The rationale used in selecting extracts from the recordings seeks to facilitate a balance between text and citations, and is a reflection of my commitment to participants' intentionality and self-presentation.

Constructing the interview

Interviews took place in a location chosen by parents and the 'unstructured' approach used helped to establish a relaxed environment for respondents, where often difficult and sensitive experiences were shared. Parents were able to determine the content and the direction of each interview, and in turn exhibit an order of importance of their personal priorities through which they conveyed events, experiences and beliefs. Parents used a similar chronological structure in their talk, which produced two types of responses, one starting with their child's birth (more frequent in mothers' talk) the other stemming from the process of diagnosis (more frequent in interviews with fathers). The two leading themes determined a shift in register and tone, from the informal, anecdotal, talk on children's infancy to a more formal approach to language in describing "*all bureaucratic matters concerning the children*" (Laura, mother). Parents valued the opportunity to attend the interviews individually, as well as

together when they were able to reflect on shared ideas and divergent experiences and goals. Parents reflected on the process of participation and their engagement with fears and hopes in their role as parents and “*non-experts*” (Bruno, father), in “*conversation with someone new*” (Anna, mother) and in “*dialogue with a professional, that sees things from a different angle*” (Mara, mother).

7.2 Socio-political threads in adults’ discourse

The analysis encompasses the linguistic representations of social positions, agency and identity, which appear in family and school discourse. The ways in which participants portray their social roles illuminates the significance of language in the process of representation and intervention; language can also reveal “who plays an important role in a particular clause and who receives the consequences of that action” (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 104).

Social structures and discourses envelop children and adults’ agency, tacitly or explicitly, affecting the quality of interactions amongst different social actors. The stories emerging from my encounters with parents and school practitioners offer examples of their positions, resistance and acquiescence. I explore the structures and discourses interwoven in adults’ practices, by presenting the narratives put forward by parents first, followed by a discussion on the themes born in the school environment.

Agency, class-identity and justice

The linguistic choices made by parents appear to be significant in punctuating how difference is imposed and misunderstood, becoming the focus of how parenting roles

and skills are constructed and perceived, subjected to comparative gazes either through self-revision or external pressures (Stevenson, 2008).

“Molte volte mi paragono, tra virgolette, agli altri... ho un gran casino a casa [laughs]. Poi io dico *non* la loro patologia io dico con il loro ‘essere’ perché non la vedo come una malattia. Sinceramente, però vedi non tutti la pensano come me a casa e questa cosa mi fa male!”

Many times I compare myself, if you like, to others... I have a big mess at home. Then I say not their pathology I say with their ‘being’ because I do not see it as an illness. Honestly, but you see not everyone thinks like me at home and this hurts me!

(Carla, mother)

Carla suggested that some family members (occasionally involved in caring roles) were not able to comprehend the complexity of her role, considering her pride and determination in motherhood excessive and quasi-irresponsible (Kayfitz et al., 2010; Skitteral, 2018). Mothers’ habitus produced the material and symbolic conditions for action, to counteract “the adversaries’ points of view” (Bourdieu, 2005a: 109). Carla went on to explain, “*I informed the psychologist of the need for a diagnosis... I needed help*”. She paused, and when she was ready to resume the interview, I asked in what way it might have helped; she smiled,

“Bella domanda. In primis, mi ha aiutato a capire che tanti dei miei atteggiamenti non erano esagerati ma erano proprio diretti a quello che io capivo che c’era che non andava, e allo stesso tempo ho capito che una vera normalità a casa non ce l’abbiamo.”

Good question. First of all, it helped me to understand that many of my attitudes were not an exaggeration but they were really directed to what I understood, that there was something wrong, and at the same time I realized that we don’t have a true normality at home.

(Carla, mother)

The diagnosis relieved Carla, at least in part, from self-doubt and guilt (Broomhead, 2013), while prompting a reconsideration of ‘normality’. However, Carla, like other parents, felt that there continued to be underlining judgements on the perceived material conditions influencing the quality of parenting and her ability to manage the composite dynamics of her family and her children’s behaviour (Gregory, 1991; Dale et al., 2006; Dermott and Pomati, 2016). Parenthood thus appears to be a ‘land’ of opportunity and struggle, across cultures, where presuppositions demarcate differentiations similar to class distinctions (de Benedictis, 2012; Dermott and Pomati, 2016). Parents shared a sense of social stratification and division that appears to be at the basis of their ability to make decisions that could enhance their children’s opportunities, in contrast with the perceptions of those who occupy a position of authority and “*define children*” (Jane, mother).

It is possible to see an alignment between class and social and cultural capital, in parents’ linguistic choices, determining their ability to challenge or protect their reality and their children’s status. The situality of their agency was described as twofold, in respect of their position in the familial field and their role in the public sphere that appeared to adhere to their class habitus.

“La socializzazione genitori-insegnanti e’ marcata cosi’: secondo loro siccome noi siamo solo genitori e loro insegnanti e loro si sopportano i nostri figli, allora noi dobbiamo sottostare a quello che dicono loro”

Parent-teacher socialization is marked like this: according to them since we are only parents and they’re teachers and they tolerate our children, then we have to submit to what they say.

(Carla, mother)

While it was not my intention to investigate social class, parents (most notably in Italy) established themselves in the interviews by foregrounding specific social positions. In so doing, parents assigned a deterministic role to class, in their sense of agency, which in some cases provided the impetus to reject common presuppositions and in others, like Carla's example, social position inferred a sense of impotence to challenge the status quo.

The shaping of parenthood, thus, is conceived as bipolar: on one hand parents are determined to define their own roles in relation to their relationship with their children, on the other they feel they have little control over their public redescriptions. For those who describe themselves as 'working class' (through a presentation of their occupation or educational histories), narratives reveal their position is in contrast with school (and medical) practitioners' bureaucratic or intellectual advantage. Parents expressed a lack of authority to question practitioners' choices, which determined their confidence to enter the debate in the first place, even when they felt "*the system is unjust*" (Laura, mother).

"Quello che mi dà fastidio è che cambia di continuo insegnanti di sostegno"

What disappoints me is that he constantly changes support teachers.

F- Ne hai parlato con la scuola?

Have you spoken to the school about it?

"E cosa vuoi gli dica io?"

What could I say to them?

(Laura)

Laura's emphasis on the position she feels she occupies, and the 'I' - which she vocally underscored - represents the distance between her and the school staff (*them*).

Laura's example shows that parents can feel unentitled to challenge the quality of their children's experience of school and, in this case, the inconsistent provision of

learning support for children. Laura proceeded to explain that she was not in a position to influence an improvement in what was offered to her son, intrinsically, and to her as a “*housewife*” more overtly. Laura’s stance was consistent with other parents describing the intersection between class (working class³⁹) and agency, in Italy and the UK. As argued by Watson (2018) in these circumstances, underachievement is undeniably “the outcome of discrimination” (*ibid*, 2018: 266).

Parents described the effects of othering and commonly accepted presuppositions tied to assumptions of life *with* autism (Murray, 2010; McGuire, 2016), signalling an enforced medicalisation of the term, which they felt is constructed to control individuals, rather than as a way of “*experiencing and nurturing*” children’s human nature (Anna, mother). This issue becomes equally poignant in Sofia’s example:

“Ha avuto mille diagnosi, tutte diverse tra loro.

A questo punto voglio un nuovo parere...poi lo avevano dimesso...

Mi hanno detto prima il bambino ha problemi di attenzione, poi di DSA, da DSA ne e’ uscito poi mi hanno detto ADHD. Poi...addirittura Asperger, solo perche’ vogliono continuare ad avere controllo su di lui, non lo so... mi sento molto in trappola ... Posso dirle queste cose?”

He had a thousand diagnoses, all different from each other.

At this point I want a new opinion ... then they discharged him...

First, they told me the child has problems of attention, then DSA⁴⁰, from DSA he came out, then they told me ADHD. Then ... even Asperger, just because they want to keep control over him, I don’t know ... I feel very trapped... Can I say those things?

(Sofia, mother)

³⁹ In the Italian language ‘working class’ is not commonly defined in this way but these conversations implied ‘belonging’ to this social class

⁴⁰ DSA is used here to mean Disturbi dello Spettro Autistico (*Disorders of the Autistic Spectrum*), in other instances it is used as an acronym for Disturbi Specifici dell’Apprendimento (*Specific Learning Disorders*)

Sofia's concrete language around diagnosis is expressive of her son 'entering' a category of distinction, that withdraws him from normalcy, from which he can just as easily be brought 'out' to re-join the general social ensemble. In the original version, in Italian, the medicalised discourse is emphasised by '*disturbi*', which equate to disturbances (although widely translated as disorders).

The example is expressive of a desire to intervene by "refusing disability" (Davies, 2018: 77) and draws attention to the sense of entrapment that envelops both mother and son. This example, and others on the use, rejection and "*affixing of labels*" (Bruno, father), highlights that parents view diagnosis as equally permanent and removable, with identities becoming interchangeably human and dishuman (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2016).

Moreover, just as Sofia's tone became progressively assertive "*they want to keep control over him*", she retreated to a position of disempowerment and subordination, as she questioned the legitimacy of her standpoint, demonstrating the weight and permanence of discourses constructed in other socio-cultural contexts, and beyond the interview space, which affect parenthood, identity and agency (Bhabha, 1994; Davies, 2018).

Davies (2018) discusses similar accounts of mothers' discourses as they encounter the disabling impact of "the diagnosis of disability" (*ibid*, 2018: 74). As Davies illustrates, the diagnosis can "set into motion the misrecognition" of personal identity, character and resourcefulness, with consequences that can entail both concrete and symbolic exclusions (Davies, 2018: 74). The conversations with participants in my study, and with mothers most vividly, illustrate similar feelings of "*obstruction*" and "*negative distortions*" of personal characteristics (Jane, mother), which situate and

reinforce difference as the inability to adhere to preconceived and inflexible discourses of normalcy.

7.3 Motherhood: “protecting my role and becoming an expert in bureaucracy”⁴¹

In relation to mothers’ shared experiences, discourses of motherhood - while nuanced by situality - appear to reflect the necessity of social and cultural capital in the form of resources to act or intervene on matters affecting their children that are highly bureaucratic, shaping perceived expectations of their role (Ryan and Runswick-Cole, 2008).

“We are mothers first” and then *“experts in bureaucracy”* after receiving the diagnosis (Anna, mother). Parents’ agency is re-defined in relation to co-existing private and social roles, dominated by a sense of subordination that prevails in the conversations with mothers describing their relationships with schools and other family members. As noted by Watson (2018) this produces issues of accountability and blame.

Attributing effectiveness to their agency from within the social field they ascribed to, parents set out to describe their position and social capital relative to *“grand”* institutions such as *“school”* and *“the clinic”* (Laura, mother). Parents illustrated social distinctions in terms of their cultural and symbolic capital (educational confidence and qualifications) and employment status. They represented their relationship with the diagnosis as *“a physical document”* and in relation to the ability or inability to *“decipher it”* (Anna, mother), together with the concrete and emotive discomfort of *“receiving it”* (Mary, mother). Discourses of resistance or acceptance

⁴¹ A quote from Anna (mother, Central Italy)

defined a sense of inferiority and/or mistrust towards the institutions or persons (tangibly or symbolically) responsible for writing children's diagnoses (Gramsci, 1992; Ferri and Connor, 2014; Fairclough, 1989, 2016).

Parents' views can be understood, on one hand, as conveying a sense of legitimacy in their ability to challenge (or respond to) the demands or suggestions made in the 'document', thus taking a deterministic stance to preserve both their children's individuality and their own faculty to act as independent parents. On the other hand, when parents positioned themselves in a working-class role, in relation to cultural readiness, their inability to comprehend the diagnosis and their insecurity to challenge or contrast the description of their children were linked to their social position and cultural and social capital.

Parenthood evolves into vigilance, for "*the words of the doctors must be right*" (Renzo, father), thus resulting in a tendency to be on the "*constant look out for differences*", signifying that, following the diagnosis, "*the spontaneity of childhood*" is often considered implausible (Renzo). Some parents overtly recognised that their inertia contributes to the state of play and, within that, their cultural capital has a critical role in defining their ability to act (Bourdieu, 1985; Lareau, 1997; 2011).

Furthermore, as Bourdieu (1985) discusses the symbolic function of titles (academic qualifications, family names, professional titles etc.), I suggest an equivalence in the symbolic function of 'naming difference' through a diagnosis. Like professional titles, a diagnosis can have a "more durable" effect on the individual it labels than that of its intrinsic characteristics (*ibid*, 1985: 733); and appears to function as (disguised) symbolic objectivity and common sense (*doxa*). Critically, the institutionalised value of the 'title' is not determined by the individuals it seeks to

‘distinguish’, rather it is determined by a social classification of correct social order which should be exposed and problematized.

When ‘disability’ is framed in relation to ‘normal’ human behaviour and ‘normal’ human being, ‘ability’ is positioned as synonymous with ‘normal’; and whatever is not ‘normal’ becomes, necessarily, *dis*-abled and less than fully human.

(Davies, 2016: 135)

In some cases, consistent with findings in Marsh, Warren and Savage (2018), parents presented their reaction to the diagnosis as a linear extension of their own “*suspicions*” and uncertainties, which destabilised their perceptions and expectancy of “*regular parenting*” (Mary, mother). The ‘normal’ benchmark, against which children’s identities are measured, thus extends to parenthood.

Some mothers associated “*coming to grips with the diagnosis*” (Tara, mother) as being distinct from parenting, for a significant period. Others considered their active engagement with the “*paperwork*” as a means to increase their children’s future opportunities “*as early as possible*” (Sara, mother). Parents also consistently mentioned the importance of socialisation and happiness as equally indispensable.

“Per me quello che conta è che sia felice”

What matters to me is that he is happy.

(Mara, mother)

Consistent with Watson (2018) “parents also indicated awareness of the interconnectedness of their child’s current identity to that which was likely to develop in the future” (*ibid*, 2018: 273), representing success entangled with uncertainties, as well as aspirations, employment and adulthood, security and independence. Further, through their narrative it transpires that parents’ fear of judgement, regarding

behaviours deemed to be unusual (more prevalent in mothers in both sites), resulted in a strict attitude towards their children and their own withdrawal from social participation. Most mothers, in Italy and England, reported that they had become accustomed to withdrawing from interactions with other children (and their mothers), and social situations identified with ‘the norm’ of childhood and parenthood (Fagan et al., 2014; Marsh et al., 2018). “*Like birthday parties and christenings and generally things you would do in public spaces with other families*”, avoiding amongst other things “*the conversations at the school gate*” (Pat, mother).

The diagnosis was introduced in some interviews as a turning point, presented in terms of bureaucracy, differences in parenthood and day-to-day adaptations, which resulted in individuals and their family occupying a new and specific social position and cultivating customary habits including uncertainty around social participation and “*realistic expectations*” (Renzo, father). The ambivalence and permanence of the diagnosis in most cases redefined family interactions and determined persistent renegotiations with resilience (Runswick-Cole, Goodley and Lawthom, 2018).

7.4 Resisting pathologizing rhetoric: socio-cultural distinctions in parents’ discourses on identity and diagnosis

Different standpoints on exclusion and subordination appear to be inscribed in cultural processes and linguistic nuances (Bhabha, 1994; Wendell, 1996; Titchkosky, 2012). In English, parents’ linguistic choices reference physical exclusion and unequal access to ‘mainstream’ opportunities. These descriptions often put forward a school culture dominated by a focus on differences, which is emphasised in the opportunities available to children situated in the “*mainstream*” grouping and not to

those “*outside it*” (Mark, father). “*He’s often sitting outside, don’t know why!*” (Stacey, mother), “*it’s a bit like relegation to the side-line*” (Mark, father). Thus, literally demarcating “the edges of human inclusion” (Titchkosky, 2012: 82) and the physical and material parameters of participation. Marginalisation becomes a way of dehumanising individuals as “*they’re being placed*” outside (Stacey, mother) due to some form of ‘imperfection’ that justifies exclusion and presents it uncritically in the guise of ‘necessity’ or ‘order’ in the school environment and discourse (Wendell, 1996; Ball, 2012; Sayers, 2018; Watson, 2018).

In the Italian examples, parents’ perceptions focus more significantly on the conditionings imposed by a ‘higher’ prevailing authority represented by medicalisation rhetoric and, often, this is seen as the cause of discrimination in school relationships. “*The school staff are always talking about behaviour, you know? They have the [diagnoses] papers, but all they talk about is behaviour*” (Carla, mother). Parents’ discursive interpretations are indicative of their discomfort with judgement (Watson, 2018) and other adults’ propensity to refute the possibility of seeing other characteristics that make-up children’s identity. This discomfort appeared in reference to receiving and sharing the diagnosis. As Laura (mother) explained, “*they said a diagnosis had to be made*”; her use of the third person, which in the original version (in Italian) is only implied, is consistent with other examples in Italian. It underscores a notion of abstraction and distance between Laura as a mother and the position of authority held by the figures involved in determining the diagnoses attached to her sons. As noted by Bagnoli (2007), this is a symbolic approach that testifies the existence of “irreducible asymmetries” between self-reflective speakers and those representing other/third-person standpoints (*ibid*, 2007: 43).

Furthermore, tone and language in the interviews, in Italian, are indicative of dichotomies in the social disparity between parents and other adults involved in their children's lives and dissonant constructions of children's identities in different places (Davies, 2018). Parents' descriptions of their children represent the contrast between familial experiences and children's redescrptions in school through a medicalised discourse. *"Luigi is such an affectionate son"* and the descriptions made by the *"clinic are completely different, it makes me and him very angry"* (Sofia, mother).

Linguistic 'prescriptive' habits invigorated by disabling language used in social settings (schools and medical fields), appeared to offer parents the opportunity to draw attention to qualities and capabilities of their children to challenge the redescrptions of their identities.

"Io lo chiamo piccolo ingegnere, lui trascorre molto tempo nel costruire, nel lavorare con le costruzioni, anche col legno, lui crea modellini di navi, al Centro mi dicono 'quello è un interesse ristretto, se trascorre tante ore così.' Io dico se ha l'attenzione particolare, se ha l'attenzione per questi lavori, loro chiudono con 'è un interesse ristretto quindi è logico che trascorra tante ore così'"

I call him little engineer, he spends a lot of time building, working with blocks, even wood, he creates model ships, at the [medical] Centre they tell me 'that's a restricted interest, if he spends that many hours like that'. I say if he has particular attention, attention for these kinds of hobbies, they shut me down with 'it's a restricted interest so it's obvious why he spends many hours like that.'

(Sofia, mother)

However, as Sofia's example shows, this is a complex sociological endeavour that parents are often pursuing without overtly denouncing the effect of embedded (subtle and indeed overt) discriminatory practices, involving their children and families. In the analysis of parents' narratives, in both geo-cultural sites, it is possible to

formulate a broad picture encompassing similarities of intent and experience. Parents presented and contested linguistic devices demarcating difference, during the interviews. These highlighted notions of performativity and subjectivity in different positions that children occupied outside the family field, in the descriptions of children according to other adults' approved systems of distinction (Bourdieu, 2010). Distinctions become markedly apparent in parents' struggle to interweave children's personal characteristics with discourses of ability in spaces dominated by normative assumptions, contributing to inequality and dissonance between childhoods (Wickenden, 2019). This way "children are variously positioned by embodied identifiers within specific spatial contexts" (Holt and Holloway, 2006: 137). The data from the interviews with fathers denotes that these identifiers can be critiqued further, by revisiting the ways dominant conceptualisations of difference appear in gendered discourses and over time. The analysis of fathers' narratives, in the next section, documents their reception and rejection of the views of other social actors, who are felt to be (frequently) operating from positions of power that neglect children's capabilities (Terzi, 2013; Devecchi, Rose and Shevlin, 2014; Thomas and Stoecklin, 2018).

7.5 Fathers' *historia magistra vitae*⁴²

When I interviewed Mario he explained, that since the formal diagnosis, "*Andrea takes medication to manage his behaviour*"; the issue of "*medicating behaviour*" was one that caused Mario to want to discuss his unhappiness with this "*remedy*", particularly as Andrea was approaching the end of primary school. Mario felt that

⁴² From Cicero's *De Oratore* (55 BC)

being on medication would hinder his son's awareness in "*middle school*". The medicalisation of autism and the medical response to behaviour appeared frequently in the Italian interviews, and were presented alongside "*ABA, or a 'version' of it*" (Carlo), a model adopted across the board at the local clinic. Having (initially) felt obliged to adhere to the advice given by doctors, Mario described his inner tensions by anchoring his own experience with the likelihood of similar circumstances reoccurring, in Andrea's "*middle school*" life; he clarified,

"Alle medie è un'altra vita, se c'è quello più grande riesce a metterti i piedi in testa, io gliel'ho sempre detto 'guarda che alle medie tu non venire a casa a piangere, se ce la fai devi difenderti da solo.' Capitava anche a me alle medie, 'se ti prendono di mira me lo devi dire, e poi impara a difenderti, come facevi una volta alle elementari'"

Middle school is a different life, if there are bigger boys they'll walk all over you, I've always told him 'make sure at middle school you don't come home crying, if you can you must defend yourself on your own'. It happened to me too in middle school, 'if you are targeted you must tell me, and then learn to defend yourself, as you once did in primary school.'

(Mario, father)

Echoing the view of other fathers, Mario appeared to contrast the diagnosis or any form of medical intervention by foregrounding his personal history and implied masculinity, using gender "as a tool of normalisation" (Heeney, 2018: 252). Other fathers presented their own educational 'history' to initiate the interview conversation, denoting a preference or tendency to withdraw from potential interactions with the symbolic authority of the school, recalling their own education as an example of marginalisation and 'othering' (Buzzanell and Turner, 2003; Gershwin Mueller and Buckley, 2014).

Perceptions and observations of their children's school experiences were frequently associated with personal 'historic' struggles, which were pronounced in fathers' tendency to look back at their own memories of schooling, as a means of framing the past and as a lesson to comprehend the present, based on personal resilience to conceive future possibilities.

"Like I say I see a lot of qualities but as a dad you still worry.

From what I know from growing-up, personally, from what I see it's identical from when I was growing-up. They said I was stupid 'cos I couldn't write a sentence, teachers wouldn't say that to him now, but I see the problems, what can occur, I worry for things like that for him. I can see history repeating itself"

(George, father)

The 'first person' understanding of othering, carried over from the past to potential experiences in the present and the future of their children's life course, was consistent in the narratives presented by fathers in Italy and the UK (Hitlin and Johnson, 2015). Their reflective stories denote a critical awareness of the hegemonic troubles that can germinate from focusing on differences in school, causing an inherent neglect for individual capabilities, and the risk of othering becoming internalised through a lack of opportunities to participate equally. Gramsci's theories of hegemony and marginalisation are critical in unveiling 'othering' its potential and thus, through meaningful participation, its pitfalls.

Hegemony involves more than a passive consensus and more than legitimate actions. It involves the expansion of a particular discourse of norms, values, views and perceptions through persuasive redescriptions of the world.

(Torfing, 1999: 302)

The data demonstrate such ‘redescriptions of the world’ can be actualised by contesting the authority of dominant discourses, as fathers seek to discuss and disrupt othering and the way exclusion is enacted in school and in the community. This disruption can depend on parents’ confidence and perceived competence to address the imposition of practices and norms that become internalised and naturalised by those who they situate and identify as deviant, minorities.

Fathers presented two distinct forms of reactivity towards the diagnosis, across the study sites, which resonate with contemporary research (Davys, Mitchell and Martin, 2017; Heeney, 2018; Marsh et al., 2018). On the one hand, they presented an emotive reaction of “*acceptance*” and, on the other, one of apparent indifference or “*rebellion*” in favour of children’s liberty, resilience and the right to “*develop in their own terms like any other child*” (Carlo).

Fathers expressed their views of “*having a child with autism*” citing initial experiences of disbelief and surprise and a tendency to “*be by my wife’s side*” rather than focusing on their own personal experience (Bruno). Fear (in medical terms) and altruism featured strongly in fathers’ experiences of the process of diagnosis in Italy; where hospitalisation is customary for both mother and child. Descriptions of fatherhood in Italy were characterised by empathy relating to the prominently medicalised practices affecting mothers and children in profound ways, “*it was a really sad and demanding time for both of them*” (Carlo).

Fathers whose discourses were associated with middle-class professions or positions, denoted masculinity (Heeney, 2018) in their stories, revealing “*disappointment*” for not experiencing particular “*milestones*” expected to be part of fatherhood (Rob).

Although with time, they were able to enlist the values and “*blessings*” of the children’s characteristics (George).

Working mostly from home, Carlo exclaimed, “*what I miss the most is when he’s not here, you can feel he’s gone, you definitely miss that!*” Carlo spoke of the journey of development Fabio had gone through, and is continuing to manifest, in the improvements in his social character and presence,

“Noi ora riusciamo a vivere una vita normale”

We now manage to live a normal life.

(Carlo, father)

The more ‘rebellious’ fathers, who spontaneously identified themselves with a working-class habitus, were eager to preserve childhood from the diagnosis “*irrespective of school practitioners’ views*” (Tino), which were described as “*heavily laden with medical terms*” (Mark) and deficit biases, which fathers were keen to oppose. Tino admitted that he had not received the boys’ diagnosis positively, to begin with, making a poignant adjustment to his perspective (Midence and O’Neill, 1999; Allred, 2015; Crane et al., 2015).

“La verità, all’inizio non volevo accettarla alla fin fine sembra anche brutto dirlo, a differenza degli altri non facevo parzialità. Non ti vedo per il fatto che tu eri in quelle condizioni o meno, io ti vedo come tutti gli altri. Ti tratto, anche se so, so che tu c’hai la diagnosi, io ti tratto come tutti gli altri. Non ti tratto come differente.

Per me sei figlio, così come ti vedo io con gli occhi miei.”

The truth is, at first I didn’t want to accept it in the end it seems bad to say, unlike others I was not partial. I don’t see you for the fact that you were in those conditions or not, I see you like anyone else. I treat you, even if I know, I know you have the diagnosis, I treat you like everyone else. I do not treat you as different.

For me you are a son, as I see you with my own eyes.

(Tino, father)

7.6 Familial identity and school redescriptions

Parents' views revealed that in many cases children's identities - as perceived in school - were significantly different in the home environment. For Italian parents, teachers placed an emphasis on "*what [their] child can't do*" and frequently reported "*bad episodes*" and "*difficult to manage behaviour*" making the home-school relationship unsustainable, causing parents' disengagement and mistrust (Mario, father). Importantly, school reports consistently opposed children's serene and happy character brought to life in the safety of the family context.

"All'asilo sembrava quasi un robottino, non gli piacevano le regole. A casa lui era nel suo territorio, mentre a scuola si trasformava diventava un altro bambino. Poi la maestra aveva anche un tono di voce molto alto per cui col tono molto alto lui tendeva a darsi colpi sulle orecchie, a nascondersi in qualunque buco buio. Lo trovavano spesso nascosto dove si mettono i giubbotti"

At preschool he was like a little robot, he didn't like the rules. At home he was in his territory, while at school he turned into another child. The teacher also had a very high tone of voice so with the very high tone he tended to hit himself on the ears, to hide in any dark hole. They often found him hiding where they hung the coats.

(Anna, mother)

Anna felt she was pressured by the teacher to seek medical advice, and in this experience found that when Andrea re-entered preschool (and consequently began the process of diagnosis) both Andrea and his family were "channelled" (*incanalati*)⁴³ into "abnormality" (Davies, 2018: 73).

While parental discourses show that children's identities, character and agency, emerge (unanimously) in a different light at school and at home, some cultural differences are visible. In the English sample, parents appeared to have more

⁴³ Anna (mother)

constructive dialogues with school staff, in most cases, with a tendency to report on achievement and a less prominent focus on behaviour; resulting, generally, in equivalent descriptions and perceptions of children's identity at school and at home. In the Italian data, overall, home-school exchanges seemed to be influenced by assumptions and contradictions in practitioners' discourses of otherness and sameness.

The importance of attitudes, positions and dispositions, transpired in the conversations between school staff prompted by the photographs in the elicitation activities (Hinthorne, 2012). Interestingly, some practitioners conveyed their personal views away from colleagues from the same class team, in writing (see example on the next page), highlighting differences in status and the subordination of particular values relating to inclusion/exclusion (MacLure, 2003; Dunne, 2009). Differences in personal aptitude and readiness were also noticeable in parents' descriptions of the ways teachers interacted with children, and in the perception and reception of children's identities in the class environment, which were pivotal in children's ability to establish their agency in the learning context. Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) considerations on the unequal distribution of resources in society provide a critical sociological tool to understand similar patterns occurring in schools, determining the distribution of material resources and affect, for children who can become marginalised in a systemic process that appears to differentiate childhoods according to normative ability and conduct (Terzi, 2013). This dualism, I argue, is not only found in the practices of adults towards children in the school setting, but also emerges in the practices and interactions between class teachers occupying a

legitimised position of authority, and teaching assistants (England) and support teachers (Italy) perceived to have inferior status.

“La mia collaborazione si differenzia anche a seconda del collega (insegnante curricolare) presente in classe; non con tutti c’è un atteggiamento di condivisione del lavoro, ma a volte ho ‘eseguito’ ciò che loro decidevano. La mia ‘intromissione’ anche riguardo la gestione della classe è considerata non opportuna perché io sono l’insegnante di sostegno e non della classe”

My collaboration changes according to the colleague (curriculum teacher) present in the classroom; not with everyone there is an attitude of sharing work, but sometimes I ‘executed’ what they decided. My ‘intrusion’ also regarding the management of the class is considered inappropriate because I am the support teacher and not the class one.

(Support teacher, via email⁴⁴)

The resonance between the data and Bourdieu’s social structures helps to ‘unpick’ how positions, interactions, relational dispositions and their sustainability, function in learning settings and affect children and adults equally. Bourdieu’s view of the social world perceived and uttered “according to different principles of vision and division” (*ibid*, 1985: 726), with the contributions of social agents to different fields, presumes the liberty of social agents “to impose their view of the world or their view of their own position in this world - their own identity” (*ibid*, 1985: 727). I would argue that children, and in particular children whose identities are produced amongst other interactions through a disabling discourse, are less likely to participate equitably (and voluntarily) in the construction of their social world. Thus, children’s opportunities to ‘impose’ their social identity are affected by the dominant power relations that pervade perceptions and the resulting habitus and social life. In line with Lehané

⁴⁴ This participant took up the offer to write an email to share her views after the photo elicitation activity

(2016), “a divide within the mainstream schools between ‘the mainstream’ and SEN resourced ‘base’ seems apparent to the TAs, whether the support base is geographically separated or not” (*ibid*, 2016: 4).

By representing subject locations as inherently, naturally different, individuals are positioned hierarchically.

(Holt, 2007: 787)

These observations are critical when analysing the foreclosure of equity affecting agency that can be suggested in language use and is imposed by physical disconnect. This way the school environment becomes a place that divides, through positions maintained by language and common sense (Gramsci 1992; MacLure, 2003). The position assigned to, and occupied by, children in any social space is an essential experience that constructs or reduces their capacity to self-reflect (Alderson, 2010) and their propensity to observe the positions occupied by adults in significant or subordinate roles.

7.7 Cultural variations in the photo elicitation focus groups

As noted by Walther (2014) “battles between agents are principally about relative positions within the field” (*ibid*, 2014: 9), and by adopting this view it is possible to identify some differences in practitioners’ situated experiences, in Italy and England and within sites. The potential for contention between practitioners’ positions appeared to be more prominent and overt in the data from the Italian schools, and enforced by the physical appearance of the classroom space, compared with the more subtle dissonance between practitioners’ roles in England where the learning arrangements were deemed to have a practical purpose. D’Alessio (2012) argues that

these procedural and professional differences, local implementation of policies for inclusion, and a physical disposition of the learning spaces shape the interactions and quality of provision for all learners, and are indicative of a longstanding view of the institutional authority and professional status of the class teacher⁴⁵. Moreover, the photo elicitation discussions *in situ* stimulated practitioners “to look at one’s own context from a different perspective” (D’Alessio, 2013: 97). Further, by establishing local interactions through research and examining practices from other contexts in clusters of class teams (such was the format in the Italian sites), important evaluations and reflections surfaced, helping to redress the habitus and consider pedagogic and attitudinal alternatives. The environment thus was re-evaluated, recognised as the site of conditionings where agency is strongly linked with learning and affective collaboration.

Structurally and implicitly, the classroom context, like other social fields, constitutes a form of “lived text which can be investigated to uncover insights into cultural values and norms” (Emmison et al., 2012: 5). Through a visual and situated method such as photo elicitation, “insights which are generally not available to social researchers through more conventional forms of data” can be brought to the surface and questioned (*ibid*). In line with Warr (2005), the group interactions in the photo elicitation activities, with school practitioners, aimed to provide a naturalistic and safe space in which all participants could convey their ideas and impressions stemming from the photographs (from their setting). An egalitarian approach to the activities, through a physical renegotiation of the space, enhanced participants’ “control in the research encounter”, giving practitioners the lead in directing the discussion, thus

⁴⁵ A further implication is present in Italian schools where support teachers hold the same teaching qualification as class/curriculum teachers, see page 20 for a brief discussion on this matter

validating personal viewpoints amongst colleagues (*ibid*, 2005: 202). The way I set up the space (a classroom chosen by school staff) reflected my intention to produce a non-hierarchical forum for dialogue prompted by the photographs. The habitual positioning of chairs and desks, which were in rows and distant from the class teacher's desk in the Italian schools, was overtly disrupted by the 'new' layout. This happened 'naturally' in the schools in England, where staff appeared to have a greater degree of control over their learning spaces; while in Italy, the physical arrangement of the classroom appeared in itself to be a curious subject for discussion amongst colleagues, some keen to tell me that they would help me restore the original layout once the activity was over (as it was considered imperative). These cultural differences represent a hierarchical orientation that appeared to govern the customary distinction between cluster leaders (*dirigenti*), class teachers (or curriculum teachers) and the support teacher(s). I had noted this social (and professional) distinction during my visits in some classes, while in other teams a close-knit interaction between roles resulted in a harmonious environment for both pupils and staff (Urton et al., 2014). In an example from one of the schools in NW England, the seamless interaction between the SENCo, the class teacher and TA, appears to represent a respectful attitude towards their roles and intersecting pedagogic values. From their respective positions, staff were able to draw attention to pupils' diversity and personal contributions to the learning environment, in a way that equalled their professional reciprocity, collaborative attitude and a pedagogy of skills-exchange.



Photograph 4477. Akeem and classmates. 19.09.2017

SENCo: “We talked a lot about where he would feel most comfortable sitting in the classroom, at the start of the year, and felt that position - closest to the door - was a good option, it would also allow for some space for some extra resources Akeem could use”

Teacher: “I think we are also mindful though that we operate a Kagan way of working⁴⁶ with all the children in class and support mixed ability groupings, and obviously we have Akeem in mind along with all the children, so it was to keep him included within that Kagan grouping as well, cos you’re primarily his one-to-one [smiles at the TA] but in a situation where Akeem’s quite strong, he’s a good example for some of the other children”

SENCo: “He knows what’s right and wrong”

TA: “He knows what the rules are, he likes it that way ‘cos he can see the whiteboard, he likes it, you can see he’s listening there, he’s very attentive”

(Staff team exchanges, 19.09.2017)

The tone of these interactions illustrates a tendency to value pedagogic understanding, personal resourcefulness (in pupils and adults) and an appreciation for particular insights shared by the teaching assistant working closely with Akeem. The sense of a collective shared pedagogic readiness, professional presentation, personal

⁴⁶ See KAGAN, S., 1994.

values and commitment played an important role in establishing children and adults' capabilities in this learning setting.

Overall, the data show that staff in the English schools - in most cases - work in more linear, collaborative and autonomous ways, determining among other outcomes more open parent-school consultations. While it was evident that teachers led the “*main group*” (TA), teaching assistants felt a sense of autonomy in delivering learning in discrete ways, however it is vital to view this ‘autonomy’ with caution.

In some cases, TAs worked with pupils in a different area of the class or outside the classroom, perceiving and embodying this habitual distinction as ‘functional’. However, the fact that these practices are considered to be functional (or even necessary) reflects the persistence of divisions based on dichotomies producing educational and societal ordering (Gramsci, 1947; Bourdieu, 1985). Lansing Cameron’s survey of practitioners’ perceptions (2016), from a sample of Norwegian mainstream and special schools, indicates ‘segregated solutions’ appear to become highly valued when these “approaches are used on a regular basis” (*ibid*, 2016: 31).

“I don’t generally question it. Me and Toby go outside, on a little table next to the class, usually with other two children that have my help and we do our activities there”

(TA)

Through an analysis of physical distinction, support allocation and distance, it is possible to note that as a consequence of these arrangements, some children will experience less favourable opportunities to share their identity and capabilities with others. This is illustrated in the conversation between the TA and the class teacher in one of the English schools. During this meeting silences prevailed, and the teacher

interjected rarely, thus it was also possible to witness the distance between her and Toby (pupil), the delivering of learning to the ‘whole group’ and the unequal opportunities for Toby to share his knowledge in the group context. “The classroom is the inside - the ground of teachers’ ‘own close community’, a place to which the ‘outsiders’ do not have full access” (MacLure, 2003: 15). The narrative illustrates the dichotomy between ‘Toby and the TA’ using a dedicated desk outside the classroom, and the ‘main group’ led by the class teacher *in* the classroom (photograph 5212).

“The other day he lined up all the animals and then put the lion in front of them, and I said ‘what are they doing?’ ‘They’re listening’ he said. And we *had* [with emphasis] spent a little time in class where we’d been learning about leaders.

He doesn’t do it to impress me”

(Miss G., TA)



Photograph 5212. Toby and Miss G sitting outside the classroom. 13.10.2017

This example shows the customary distance between Toby and Miss G and the group. Miss G’s observation and appreciation of Toby’s intellectual and affective engagement in the ‘main’ lesson, though they had only spent a “*little time*” in the class, was a representative example of Toby’s daily educational experiences. Toby’s learning interactions appeared to be halted by omitting the possibility of mutual discoveries (for Toby and his TA) in the presence of their peers. As Miss G exposes

Toby's understanding of leaders developed through participation in the 'whole group' activity, her statement "*he doesn't do it to impress me*" is a tentative suggestion expressive of a desire to change Toby's circumstances, countering exclusion, for Toby to be able to 'impress' others. The short exchange provided an estimation of notably different opportunities to achieve in connection with others, who are afforded greater agency as a group. In her tone, Miss G symbolically maintains her own position, in a distinct place with Toby (*we had*), from which she is able to make - only - discrete observations of Toby's capabilities, potential and intellectual repertoire.

Support staff demonstrated these symbolic disparities in the photo elicitation forum openly and implicitly. Some support teachers chose to comment on the difference between their own status and that of the 'class teacher' and the dynamics of their learning environment, away from the focus group and at the end of the 'PE' activity, such as in the email example from the Italian support teacher (p.322).

Practitioners' readiness, sense of authority and professional freedom

The staff at the schools I visited, in Italy and England, were aware of the structural nature of their work and for a number of (political and ideological) reasons felt removed from "*central government*" (or "*Ministero*") and obligations around inclusion. In accordance with Butt (2018) and Smith (2018), TAs and support teachers described their role as more to do with "*personal experience*" and "*previous experience or commonsense*" (TAs); in contrast with teachers' discourses and their tireless propensity to feel governed by (abstract) figures, which appeared to determine their behaviour even when policies were deemed inaccessible.

Staff positioned me during the activities as an “*objective expert*” and ‘checked’ if certain “*techniques*” used with their “*pupils with autism [were] acceptable or good*” by involving me in the dialogue and in the descriptions of particular practices during the photo elicitation. Interestingly, the majority of support staff initiated their input in the photo elicitation activities by attempting to involve me in their lived experiences by posing questions at the end of their observations, thus suggesting parity and trust by constructing their narratives interactively through a form of transactional reflexivity (Koelsch, 2013). Teachers overall had a less overt way of exposing their subjectivities, denoting both a hierarchal role in the conversations as well as a greater sense of vulnerability in their choice of pedagogic approaches.

For example, in reference to using the outdoor space surrounding the school during a reading activity (photograph 1377), the class teacher described her choice to keep the class united as a group for *her* lessons, implying that she was not persuaded by the trend to differentiate by other means. Her powerful metaphor surprised her colleagues (she later overtly positioned herself as an outsider and identified as being “*criticised by other colleagues*” for her choices).

“Io li porto fuori, è un’opportunità per tutti. Poi io osservo Andrea, lui è come una bussola. Quando funziona per lui so che sono sulla strada giusta anche per gli altri. Perché lui non è facile da coinvolgere ma quando ci riesci è una bella soddisfazione per tutti”

I take them outside, it’s an opportunity for everyone. Then I observe Andrea, he’s like a compass. When it works for him I know I am on the right track for all. Because it’s not easy to involve him but when you get there it is a great satisfaction for all.

(Literacy teacher)



Photograph 1377. Andrea (far left) and class. 04.04.2017

Practitioners' nuanced responses to the images revealed their position in their setting. School practitioners identified either as conscious "*risk takers*" or, in more positive accounts, as being "*progressive*", asserting their role to challenge common sense practices around difference and inclusion/exclusion (Dunne et al., 2017), through discretionary practices (Barberis, Buchowicz and DeLuigi, 2016). The 'PE' activities acted as a successful prompt for professional and (inter)personal reflection, providing the forum to engage in critical conversations that appeared to be (overtly and inherently) somewhat overdue. This method offered critical opportunities to share effective pedagogic strategies and differences in decision-making and autonomy. My presence (which was one of a facilitator and of minimal interference) appeared to provide a sense of security in mitigating the embodied professional habitus and hierarchies, demonstrating that practitioners in different roles wanted to share their (personal) experiences and professional choices with others.

It appeared, in some instances, that a sense of uncertainty around the "*legitimacy*" of personal initiative, in their efforts to be "*differently inclusive*" (class teacher), prevailed in practitioners' discourses. Teaching assistants shared a sense of "*being*

perceived as separate with their pupil", tentative around the authority to act in favour of a more formative integration of pupils' skills, and "*limited*" in their opportunities to convey their feelings of detachment from "*general class learning*" (TAs in dialogue). Some class teachers expressed their inclination to keep at a 'safe distance' from pupils needing additional support, making concessions for this habit as they felt disempowered or unable to invest time in practices they had not trained in, or previously tested.

"Io per me, devo dire, per me Fabio è l'ultimo dei miei pensieri a Fabio ci pensa lei. Cioè, per me Fabio quando manca lei per Fabio, io vado in tilt. Oltre Fabio abbiamo almeno 4 o 5 che necessitano di un rapporto individualizzato, per cui Fabio è veramente, a volte lo dico a lei, mi sento anche in colpa, è l'ultimo dei miei pensieri. Perché perlomeno so che Fabio ha lei e sono a posto, gli altri invece? Ci sono bambini che invece non hanno nessuno. E quindi mi devo dividere in in 4 o 5 sicuramente, quindi figurati lui come tutti, e poi, e in più ci sono gli altri 20"

I have to say for me, for me Fabio is the last of my thoughts she [support teacher] thinks about him. That is, for me Fabio, when she isn't in for Fabio, I go mad. Aside from Fabio we have at least 4 or 5 that need individualized support, so Fabio is really, sometimes I say it to her, I even feel guilty, he's the last of my thoughts. Because at least I know that Fabio has her and I'm fine, what about the others? There are children who have no one. And so I have to divide myself in in 4 or 5 at least, so imagine him as everyone else, and then, there are the other 20.

(Class teacher)

Like other - similar - cases, this class teacher candidly exposes the reliance on support professionals to carry out their own teaching and learning activities as distinct from the general class and 'distant' from the central figure of the class teacher. This approach subsequently highlights significant pressures felt by class teachers, which

they use to legitimise their lack of knowledge of individual pupils ‘assigned’ to a supporting colleague. It also reverberates with the work of Sikes, Lawson and Parker (2010), by reflecting on the way discourses that relate to difference and inclusion serve a similar purpose in the way they function to divide the ‘individual’ from the ‘general’ group. It can be argued that practitioners polarise the way they perform teaching and interacting with pupils, based on their position/ability, and enact a distinction mechanism which weaves personal discourses with educational ‘ideals’ (Gramsci, 1992; Croll and Moses, 2000). Sikes and colleagues (2010) also found that exposing these discourses through research participation can “facilitate awareness” and potentially motivate the production of “socially just pedagogies” (*ibid*, 2010: 251; Bernardi, 2019a).

Class teachers in both sites overtly disclosed their tendency to perpetuate the distinction between the “*whole group*” and “*the individual with learning difficulties*”, associating this practice with their commitment to getting the whole group through the expected learning program or curriculum demands, with their discourses displaying a difference in expectations for pupils for whom additional support was available. This idea extended to class teachers’ perceptions of teaching assistants or support teachers, underlining a difference in professional worth or status. Teaching assistants and support teachers alike felt that, upon reflection, their sense of professional autonomy was often linked to the class teacher’s desire to conduct the lesson “*with the rest of the group without disturbance*” (Support teacher). These conversations around role distinctions resulted in some tensions amongst practitioners, during the photo elicitation, illustrating common sense patterns around positioning support teachers and “*their pupils*” as outsiders; making the shared choral

experience of support staff a vehicle for validation and redress for disabling differences in identities that had until then been ‘claimed’ as normal.

Importantly, through the photo elicitation interviews it was possible for all practitioners to reflect on the relationship between professional autonomy and identity and the intersection of personal attitudes in the classroom ‘matrix’. The discourses that surfaced during the research activities enabled staff to consider personal reflections around positioning some pupils as outsiders, and solicited considerations on the impact on class teachers’ knowledge of pupils’ capabilities, strengths and personal interests (Jordan, Lindsay and Stanovich, 1997; Terzi, 2014; Hale et al., 2016; Robeyns, 2017). In line with findings from ongoing research on the quality of learning for pupils receiving additional support, in mainstream schools, in the UK and other (OECD⁴⁷) countries, it is possible to evaluate teachers’ increasingly overt recognition of their detachment from pupils positioned outside the general class and the practices of distinction maintaining these conditions (Blatchford et al., 2011; Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012; Masdeu Navarro, 2015; Webster and Blatchford, 2018). Conversely, responses from support teachers and TAs functioned to provide an opportunity to defend children’s agency and capability, as well as challenging their own distance from class activities and their limited pedagogic input in learning activities involving “*the rest of the class*” (TAs). Their role on some occasions was seen to restrict their own opportunity to engage fully in the social and educational life of the class-group.

When collaborative approaches emerged in discussions amongst practitioners, it became clear that if pupils and support staff are fully integrated in the life of the

⁴⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

classroom this kind of engagement functions as a way of supporting participation and importantly visibility between peers (both children and adults). Support teachers said that when they felt “*valued*” by colleagues they were able to identify the potential and “*popularity of their pupil*”, thus recognising personal agency and alluding to being more successful in integrating pupils’ skills “*with the rest of the group*” (Support teacher). According to Santos and Lima-Rodrigues (2016), the embodiment of inclusion and the deep engagement of educators in the shared attendance of learning can profit fundamental personal and interpersonal skills amongst adults and children. Moyles and Suschitsky (1997) and Ronfeldt and colleagues (2015) found that “teachers benefit from the quality of collaboration” between educational practitioners, in turn affecting the experiences and attainment of all learners (*ibid*, 2015: 64). The positive accounts of collaborative working practices, resulting from a reconciliation between professional roles in the classroom, were presented by support teachers (and TAs) with an emphasis on engaging the more reluctant class teachers in a process of re-alignment, ‘championing’ positive working relationships as a model for laying the foundations for inclusion.

As argued by Alderson (2010), it can be difficult to persuade staff in education (and other children’s services) that children’s views in any process of evaluation and change in their educational provision are a critical aspect of any genuine advancement in participation. The dominant view frames adults as “primarily accountable to systems that manage, evaluate and fund the services, not the children” and in so doing adults ascribe to the habitus of a top down pedagogy inhibiting children’s autonomy and their own professional freedom (*ibid*, 2010: 91). While the emphasis was often greater on the integration of the professional figure of the adult in the class-group,

and practitioners' relationships, it is undeniable that children's positive experiences in school were a result of critical collaborative efforts between adults.

“Ecco questa foto dà comunque l'idea di un bambino che è inserito in classe soprattutto ci sono i bambini che si avvicinano, quindi c'è un buon lavoro, da parte degli insegnanti, di coinvolgere i compagni all'interno della classe. Sarà che, anch'io, come insegnante di sostegno mi fa piacere quando vedo non solo il mio gruppo e la mia equipe ma anche i compagni che si avvicinano e per agevolare e promuovere di più l'inclusione non solo da parte del bambino ma anche di loro stessi; c'è questa sensibilità, questa attenzione, quando sono piccoli, poi? ... non so”

Well this picture, anyway, gives the idea of a child who is part of the class especially as there are children who are approaching him, so there is good work from teachers involving classmates within the class. I, also, as a support teacher I am pleased when I see not only my group and my team but also the classmates who approach and facilitate and promote inclusion more not only on the part of the child but also of each other; there is this sensitivity, this attention, when they're young, after? ... I don't know.

(Support teacher in reference to photograph 3186, on the next page)

The support teacher, in this example, provoked positive reactions when she used “*la mia equipe*” (my team), indicative of her own sense of belonging and indeed partnership with colleagues. While the photograph of the group of boys shows engagement in a collective peer exchange, the choice of the word “*avvicinano*” (approaching) is one that can represent a sense of hesitation that is not actual, but rather expressive of a persistent comparative discourse and maintenance of a dichotomised positioning of children, from the viewpoint of adults. Paolo was indeed immersed in the ‘superhero cards’ discussion as an active member of the core group⁴⁸, and positioned himself in the interaction without hesitation, breaking

⁴⁸ I heard his exchanges with the boys when taking the photograph

through adult-perceived boundaries to engage successfully with his peers (Ferne et al., 1995).



Photograph 3186. Paolo and classmates. 04.04.2017

Interestingly, the peripheral position chosen by the boy on the left was neither discussed or questioned by practitioners during the photo elicitation activity. In this and similar examples from my observations in Italy and the UK, it is possible to note that children have a more fluid and dynamic approach to boundaries than that perceived, more rigidly, by adults. As discussed in Chapter 6, in favourable conditions that facilitate autonomy, children are active in negotiating and determining their own social identities and positioning in ways that resist the boundaries produced by adults and are successful in redescribing their social and cultural capital in ways that disrupt the doxa.

Davies (1989), Wood (2014) and Corsaro (2018) discuss the possibilities that free-play, role-play and children's social interactions can offer to enable the reinvention of positioning and social participation in peer cultures, that are both "possible and

desirable” (Corsaro, 2018: 214). Further, adult-led discourses and verbal and nonverbal practices play an important role in producing boundaries, prompting adults to act in accordance with their perceived ‘existence’, and are illustrative of significant polarised patterns affecting pupils and staff.

The data also show that children acting independently are successful in reconfiguring the dominant social structure while adults continue to struggle, maintaining illusive dichotomies. The responses to the photographs show that the authority of support staff often “*exists in parallel with that of class teachers*” (TA) rather than being integrated within the class. This distinction becomes effective in the tendency to discriminate pedagogic discourse and practices. These common sense patterns of distinction appeared across schools, in both countries, characterising discourses around difference as well as the possible renegotiation of boundaries that, in most cases, had not previously been overtly discussed or challenged.

Educational practitioners ‘looking’ for stereotypical behaviours

Although I had explained to school staff (and parents) that children’s identities were the central focus of my study, the conversations prompted by the photo elicitation brought to the surface a variety of perspectives on topics common across study sites, such as inclusion, behaviour, attention, development and “*reluctance towards change*” among other examples of stereotyped ideas around autism. These rhetorical references intersected with personal attitudes towards children as well as challenges between practitioners occupying different roles in the classroom (or outside it). As Lüke and Grosche (2018) found, attitudes towards individual pupils and inclusion

vary significantly depending on the context in which educational practices occur and issues are discussed, and comprise the personal beliefs of the social actors involved.

Practitioners' sense of authority and professional freedom appeared frequently in the photo elicitation activities with distinct purposes: on one hand, class teachers tacitly described their role as one of responsibility for the "*class group*" thus their professional authority was enacted in their leadership of the 'majority' of their pupils and focused on achieving specific academic goals. On the other, teaching assistants and support teachers felt, in most cases, encouraged to proceed independently, availing of a sense of professional freedom based on their understanding, knowledge and awareness of their pupil's "*needs, routines, likes and dislikes*" (TA). However, in the latter case, discourses of separation and division prevailed over discourses of integration of particular strengths for the promotion of academic and personal development; thus, perpetuating physical and metaphoric distance through an idea of operating from a peripheral boundary, which appeared irremovable and unchallenged. This distance seemed to be associated with practitioners' tendency to use terminology associated with stereotypical descriptions of autism that did not always reflect the realities of their pupils, thus undermining personal characteristics, individuality and identity. In accordance with the literature (see Martinetti, 2006; Hutcheon and Lashewicz, 2014), it is possible to explore the position occupied by practitioners, and the extent to which they feel prepared to accommodate and engage with diversity, and which 'type' of diversity they are more inclined to explore. In my earlier example from Fabio's class, the teacher appeared less tentative towards pupils with Italian as a second language, while commenting on her inability to understand particular "*characters*" and "*features of autism*". In this case, and similar ones, the estimation

of stereotypical (possible) behaviours resulted in an active self-exclusion of teachers from engaging with pupils “*with autism*”, as well as anxiety, and a reductionist stance towards understanding individuality, abdicating the responsibility of advancing “*any*” capabilities to support staff.



Photograph 1366. Andrea reading at playtime. 09.05.2017

When this photograph appeared on the screen, his support teacher introduced Andrea in terms of his condition, “*Andrea has a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD*”; relating her descriptions to past behaviours before, gradually, becoming more holistic in her ambition to demonstrate that Andrea had made significant improvements in his social participation in class.

“Il bambino con ADHD è, o positivo o provocatorio, aveva queste dinamiche, oppositive, di sfida, anche aggressive nei confronti dei compagni e anche l’anno scorso, non ci son più problemi quest’ anno si avvicina ai compagni e alle compagne. Guardando le foto degli anni scorsi altrimenti, potevi vedere anche il viso. Forse è tutto diverso? Eh?”

The child with ADHD is, either positive or provocative, he had these dynamics, opposing, challenging, even aggressive towards his classmates and even last year, there are no more problems this year, he approaches his classmates. Looking at the pictures from the last years, you could even see the face. Maybe it's all different? Uh?

(Support teacher)

The image also prompted reflections on the composure and focus that Andrea showed while reading independently during playtime. Class teachers in Italy and in England, often expressed surprise at particular successes described by support staff and evident in the photographs presented in the activity, with a recurrent expression being “*I didn’t know he could do that!*” (class teacher). Children’s potential, motivation and willingness to participate were only occasionally brought to light and, often, in contrast with persistent discourses of “*typical*” or stereotyped “*expected behaviours*” (class teacher). Some Italian practitioners adopted an openly deterministic medical discourse of “*pathology of autism*” (patologia dell’autismo) in ways that seemed to suggest a professional readiness to recognise and describe symptoms and distinctive features ‘typical’ of a medical condition. It was clear that this stance followed a common trend, across the Italian schools I visited, illustrating that some practitioners had a propensity to affiliate with medical discourses to underline their own professional status.

The popularisation of a medical narrative intensified a discourse of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Runswick-Cole, 2014) and, importantly, resulted in the abstraction and generalisation of children’s identities. The latter appeared to be legitimised at the expense of an enriching and motivational observation and recognition of children’s own characteristics; and this tendency materialised in the limited interactions between class teachers and their pupils with a diagnosis. As proposed by Collins (2016) and Hodge (2016) labelling practices may in fact interfere with understanding and respecting the person associated with a diagnosis, leading to further difficulties in the integration of capabilities and agency. Some practitioners also made reference to “*images*” of popular culture, behavioural literature and “*the theory of mind*”, sharing

views that appeared to signify an underestimation of the power of discrimination in such common sense discourses. These views were illustrated in the tendency to seek-out stereotypical expectations, to produce a general estimation of potential, distinguishing “*problems*” or “*difficulties*” as belonging to a minority (Davies, 2016; McGuire, 2016), and implicitly unlikely to be experienced by other children.

Familial and educational views in contrast

The predisposition to ‘school difference’ *versus* the observation and appreciation of individuals’ capabilities is one of the tensions that emerges overtly in the views of adults (Terzi, 2014; Ruffolo, 2009), inviting a critical reading of the intersection between perceived capacities (or capital) and the embodiment of habitus in practices of systemic distinction, in different social spaces. Further, contributions from children’s self-presentation in the creative space (and in autonomy) underscore their ‘enhanced agency’ in contrast with the limited capacity to perform agency in structured environments (Hammad and Singal, 2015).

Parents exposed the tendency of school practitioners to limit the significance of children’s capabilities and interests, upon which children’s inclusion and the capacity to achieve their potential appears to be premised. My findings suggest that the lack of opportunities to explore and expand existing personal resources has a complex and long-lasting effect, documented extensively in the literature (see Lareau, 2011; Freire, 2018; Runswick-Cole, 2014; Hammad and Singal, 2015). Educational and social inclusion were felt to be inextricable and conditioned by the power of labelling and the “*negative perceptions of difference*”, in school and society, which “*could interfere*” in future life choices and interactions (Mark, father).

“L’ho cambiato d’ asilo, perché ormai era etichettato, qualunque cosa facesse era colpa di Andrea. Il bambino si vedeva che aveva un disagio e la cosa va avanti”

I moved him from the preschool, because at this point he was labelled, whatever happened it was Andrea’s fault. You could see the child had a discomfort and it’s an enduring thing.

(Anna, mother)

This enduring difference is consistent with the dissonance between labelled children and the ‘class group’ reproduced throughout schooling. Recalling Bourdieu and Passeron’s considerations on academic distinction (1990), it is also possible to observe the ways in which educational practices that divide children are reproduced and legitimised by hierarchical (societal and professional) discourse positioning support teachers and teaching assistants as ‘outsiders’.

“Io son convinta che l’insegnante di sostegno stia facendo un ottimo lavoro, io credo che ci sia un po’ di distacco tra insegnanti curricolari e insegnanti di sostegno, nel senso che sono convinta purtroppo che l’insegnante di sostegno lavori solo con Fabio - punto!
Tutto il resto del mondo fa altro”

*I’m sure the support teacher is doing an excellent job, I think there is a bit of distance between curricular teachers and support teachers, in the sense that I am certain - unfortunately - that the support teacher works with Fabio - period!
The rest of the world does something different.*

(Mara, mother)

Children thus become accustomed to ‘difference’ and occupy a disciplinary space that can either encourage and enhance personal capabilities or provoke resistance and discomfort. In some cases children’s openness to share their capabilities in the creative encounters could be seen to be a powerful rendition of the disparity between

their ‘school self’ and their ‘private self’ (Goffman, 1990; Delgado-Gaitan, 1998; Jenkins, 2014).

Furthermore, common across sites, the conversations amongst school practitioners appeared to reinforce a stereotyped idea that “*children with autism need constant guidance*” (class teacher). These subjectivities imply that schools as disciplinary spaces, invested in cultural assumptions, can legitimise discourses that determine how dis/ability is received, perceived and co-constructed by children and adults alike (Bernstein, 2003; Hodge, 2016; Bernardi, 2019a). Moreover, when practitioners articulated their awareness of particular skills and knowledges that children might display, some felt it was unrealistic to incorporate such capabilities in the learning context, or to adopt these skills to enable independence in the classroom.

7.8 Gramsci and the persistent idea of Citizen Workers: aspirations, contradictions and commonalities

Refusing to separate culture from systemic relations of power, or politics from the production of knowledge and identities, Gramsci redefined how politics bore down on everyday life through the force of its pedagogical practices, relations and discourses.

(Giroux, 2002: 41)

The themes emergent in the study of adults’ dispositions align with Gramsci’s social theories (1947), illuminating persistent ideologies that are manifested in education and continue to reproduce socio-economic models of distinction that undervalue personal capabilities (Bowles and Gintis, 2011). School practitioners appear subjected to an economic structure that they (often and actively) reproduce by advancing a ‘group or majority’ *versus* the individuals confined to marginalised positions through discourses of difference.

An economy-driven ideology appears to produce ambiguity in the processes of inclusion and limits opportunities for promoting diversity, despite the popularity of such discourses in public policy and education (see Williams, 2004; Martin and Franklin, 2010; D'Alessio, 2013). Moreover, the data suggest that this ideology, in contemporary education and society, persists in practitioners' attitudes and in societal behaviours; and while it may be carefully re-scripted, through a 'mutation of words', it perpetuates the legacy of 'times' perceived to be surpassed (Gramsci, 2018/1918).

Analysing the educational significance of ideology, and hence the impact on societal participation for children situated on the margins (physical and symbolic), exposes critical links between the permutation of academic advancement into socio-economic participation, and an ableist gaze on minorities in the context of a 'partial education' with limited potential for civic engagement. "Gramsci provides a political referent for criticizing schools that he claims are merely a bourgeois affair" (Giroux, 2002: 51). Thus, it is possible to draw a parallel between class-based distinctions and ableism to review, in this light, how practices of otherness are deployed in the immediacy of schooling, affecting the distribution of educational resources among children (Terzi, 2010), and their future opportunities. The data also demonstrate the lasting effect of the tendency to distinguish pupils according to ability, reflecting an "occupational hierarchy" rather than creating possibilities to evoke and explore diversity, equality and equity (Bowles and Gintis, 2011: 11). The interplay of factors understood as perceptions of daily practices, identities and subjectivities, in education, potentially produce othering by placing a subconscious emphasis on 'employability' or economic return on the academic worth of the "labelled child" (Hodge, 2016: 189; Penketh, 2016). The data suggest that the investment of time to

explore individuality and personal capabilities, in school and in the family setting, can determine the value and quality of participatory opportunities that are available to children. Parental and educational expectations, which intersect with participation, are often restricted *a priori* due to adults' perceptions of the permanence of social boundaries (Onnis, 2013). In this context, discourses, practices and common sense, are together internalised by those held by labels of dis/ability and established and perpetuated by the social structures that (re)produce ableism. Hegemony and marginalisation can materialise in academic struggle and direction that 'normalise' the tendency to position children with a diagnosis and their support staff as outcasts, contributing to "the production of students' identities as 'insiders' and 'outsiders' of the learning community" (D'Alessio, 2012: 522).

The data also expose the views of parents who are against "*adults forcefully inculcating academic skills*" on their children, and causing "*significant stress and anxiety*", with a propensity to favour "*happiness in a social context with other kinds of potential*" (Mara, mother). Talking about Fabio's "*fear of writing under instruction*", Mara told me he writes spontaneously at home, and one day invited her to see what he had done,

"Lui mi ha detto 'hai visto mamma ho usato anche l'apostrofo!' L'ho visto! Questo per dire che sicuramente se l'ha guardato nei quaderni degli anni passati, non è che a lui non piace [scrivere], lui ha un mondo diverso, in realtà dovrebbero essere gli insegnanti a trovare il metodo giusto per far sì che lui apprenda"

He said to me 'look mum I even used an apostrophe!' I saw it! This is to say that he probably looked at it in the notebooks from the previous years, it's not that he doesn't like [writing], he has a different world, teachers should actually find the right method for him to learn.

(Mara)

Like Mara other parents, in a similar economic position, had the confidence to challenge their children's educational providers and were keen to articulate their awareness of the persuasive nature of common sense in teachers' negative reports and habit of leaving particular achievements unnoticed.

I argue that the children in this study have been successful in establishing their own expressive and communicative tools, engaging with their cultural capital, personal resourcefulness and identity; thus, as socially active members of their field it is possible for their engagement to become the first step in the process of redescription. However, my findings also suggest that many of the children across sites, age and gender, experience both subtle and visible distinctions in accessing opportunities to engage their personal capabilities, which indicate the persistence of "unequal selectedness" and exclusionary practices in pedagogic, familial and societal spaces (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990: 72; Gramsci, 1992; Crow, 2010; Terzi, 2014).

These themes elicit the notion that such distinctions are the effect of the distance between those designing norms (a social *stratum* that can be identified with policy makers and policy) and those subjected to such norms, most noticeably children and parents. Bourdieu's structural appraisal of social reproduction resonates with this idea of 'distance', which becomes naturalised as common sense and maintained by the persuasive role of institutions through 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 1985; Gramsci, 1992). The authority of common sense is perpetuated in the construct of diagnoses and interventions, by those who internalise positions of accountability for enacting norms and engaging in such practices that produce order and are "efficacious in enabling, constraining and motivating human behaviour" (O'Boyle, 2013: 1021). Language (in particular) appears to reproduce a critical distance between different stakeholders

(Thomas, 2012), forestalling opportunities for a reflexive and viable dialogue and potentially affecting the ability of teachers and families to exercise agency and make critical changes in the fields in which they can have a significant role.

Language has implications on childhood identity and status. In the majority of the interviews, with the adults involved in the study, when the notion of childhood was introduced, spontaneously, by parents and school practitioners, it was described “*as a way of being*” or as “*a chronological phase*”. Interestingly, I found that adults made a distinction between the way they narrated or perceived childhood, in a normative sense, and the way they described children (participants) in relation to their peers, siblings or classmates. For children with a diagnosis, attesting difference, childhood appeared to be mitigated, somewhat underplayed, and substituted with definitions relating to behaviour (i.e. acceptable/inacceptable/unusual/strange). Behaviour and identity in some instances became interchangeable.

Teacher: “We have a collection of animal (toys) that have come from far and wide”

TA: “He accumulates them...he tends to wander in other classrooms to find things”

F- He wants to live on farm and to live and work with other children.

TA: “Oh !”

Teacher: “Did he say that?”

F- Yes, he has some great ideas about living and working on a farm in the future.

TA: “He’d love to be with the reception class children, he gazes in there and all their toys”

(TAs, teacher and researcher, 31.10.2017)

This example illustrates the tendency to approach children’s ideas with some scepticism: the choice to use “*accumulates*” appears to be judgemental and perhaps more ‘problematic’ than the adults’ own collecting from “*far and wide*”. I joined the conversation in reference to Toby’s interest in animals, eager to convey his

enterprising plans for life on a farm with his peers, which he had shared with me in detail earlier that week during his creative activity. My intent was to hear Toby's story from the adults that interact with him daily and discover more about his peer interactions. My interjection was met with surprise (from the class teacher) and the proceeding interactions overshadowed Toby's idea to "*work with other children*", the possibility to expand on Toby's story was stalled again by the TA's comment.

This example, like others, indicates that different perceptions of childhood shape interactions between children and adults at home and in school, highlighting the discrepancy between children's self-presentation and adults' - often sweeping and oversimplified - redescriptions of children. Critical pedagogy and the new sociology of childhood (Matthews, 2007; Montessori, 2011; Prout and James, 2015; Corsaro, 2018) provide a critical frame of reference in the analysis of the self-identifying choices enacted and displayed in a multitude of performative and concrete forms in children's art, and recorded in field notes and photographs. Importantly, the children in the study had an opportunity to position themselves in a non-judgemental space that attempted to foster their autonomy to perform and share playfulness and intentionality, knowledge and expertise, seemingly left unexplored in many familiar contexts.

Moreover, the research forum provided opportunities for children, parents and school practitioners to be heard, whilst reflexively listening, noticing and valuing experiences and internalised discourses, re-presenting and re-discovering identities in context. These practices brought to the surface themes of poignant personal relevance such as loneliness, friendship and 'the future' in the views of parents and

school practitioners, challenging redundant narratives of difference to reclaim a humanist notion of childhood.

7.9 Reflexivity, encouraging change from within

The analysis of themes and threads that appear in parental and school narratives promote or contest “certain ideologies” that situate children’s identities within different ‘frames’ (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 104).

The interchange between agency and structural position, examined using Bourdieu and Gramsci’s social theories, demonstrates differing levels of privilege and inequality assigned to individuals occupying social roles with different forms of material, cultural and symbolic capital. Parents’ dispositions signal that they are likely to equate, implicitly and explicitly, their social roles with agency and with discourses that are comparable with class-oriented subordination and ‘ableism’ (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). The ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw, 1991) between social position and agency appears to have a deterministic pull on parents’ own identities and actions, and more specifically it is seen in some cases to impoverish opportunities for their children’s human potential. Parents’ perceived positions do not equate with will. Intersectionality offers a point of departure in parents’ narratives enmeshed with societal and school-based medicalised and behaviourist practices and discourses.

Awareness through self-reflection and participation is a means for parents to establish their civic agency, providing the scope to examine their role and the social parameters in which constraints are imposed. Parents use a range of linguistic devices, past experiences and social assumptions to frame their understanding and interpretation of

their realities, denoting a consciousness of their role as social actors operating from a troubling standpoint that induces vigilance towards social divisions (Bourdieu, 1987). Adults' discourses across sites are illustrative of "the idea that individual action is circumscribed by structural constraints" (Hitlin and Johnson, 2015: 1; Adams, 2006; Bourdieu, 2010; Bradley, 2016). Discourses of social positioning demonstrate that adults are cognisant of dominant structures in relation to both the present and future possibilities (Gramsci, 1992; Bradley, 2016). Further, perpetuated ideas of difference or discordance reproduced by language choices (made by adults) appear to determine access to, and the quality of, participatory experiences available to children.

A critical engagement with adults' discourses provides the connection between their experiences and the persistent social inequalities that are accepted or transgressed in the shaping of participation (for children and adults). Parents and practitioners' narratives address issues of unequal opportunities that are justified and legitimised through an economic frame of reference, forestalling a just integration of children's capabilities. Adults' testimonies and their appraisal and representations of the social fabric in which children's realities are situated can compete with children's views, highlighting the role of different social actors in compounding or endorsing children's human potential.

Part IV Thesis conclusion

*I funzionari hanno costituito
una specie di Stato nello Stato,
opprimono i cittadini con la tirannia della loro
incompetenza irraggiungibile,
impersonale, irresponsabile.⁴⁹
Antonio Gramsci (6 April 1918)⁵⁰*

Chapter 8

Knowledge mobilisation and Aesthetics

Over the course of this study I have interacted with children and adults, theory and practice, aesthetic and narratological contributions, to engage in an examination of children's agentic status and identities. Throughout the processes of reading, participating in the field and analysis, it has become apparent that this research is situated at a critical 'interchange' between methodological debate, conflicts in the enactment of children's participatory rights, power and the social construction of dis/ability discourse that engulfs childhood and children.

This project has developed into a process of civic and humanistic engagement, for participants and as well as myself (MacLure, 2003; Tirri et al, 2013), and has been a vehicle for reflexivity and action that I would term political and radical.

⁴⁹ Officials have formed a kind of State in the State, oppressing citizens with the tyranny of their unattainable, impersonal, irresponsible incompetence. (Author's own translation, an English text is not available).

⁵⁰ The letter first appeared in a collection of Gramsci's letters titled *La città futura. Scritti 1917-1918* (The Future City. Writings 1917-1918), edited by Sergio Caprioglio (1982). This extract is from a revised collection: GRAMSCI, A., 2018. *Odio gli indifferenti*. Milano: Chiarelettere Editore Srl.

At different levels and ranges, during the planning and conduct of the study, I contended with social discourses tied to presuppositions around children's ability to participate in research. Concurrently, the analysis revealed explicitly differential expectations for children's civic agency and competing views on children's ability to observe and review their social surroundings and status. These tensions produced valuable multidirectional pulls implicated in establishing the research process, my positioning and motivation to explore new routes and approaches to engage with children as competent social actors. Following their lead in the collaborative use of material and symbolic literacies, available in the research activities, it was possible to *participate with* children.

Reviewing and adapting arts-based methods (see Chapter 2), I explored ways to preserve and extend the known benefits of artistic expression and embodiment, and the conditions of autonomy, spontaneity and improvisation woven into artistic production, to engage children's cultural capital (Barone, 2008; Veale, 2009; Procter and Hatton, 2015; McNiff, 2013; Moon, 2013). The review of existing research suggests that children rarely have access to the benefits of creative autonomy (see Penketh, 2016); and visual and cultural practices are seldom integrated in research with children, and are usually shaped by adults.

This thesis examines how artistic disciplines can nurture a culture of 'human discovery', combining established practice-led research with artistic freedom, which I would suggest continues to be underexplored. This thesis offers an opportunity to challenge this methodological *lacuna*, contributing to a philosophical, civic and practical debate.

It emerged that issues of knowledge validity can provoke hesitancy in established artists and researchers alike (Moon, 2013), yet arts-based methods can also explicitly challenge the persistent methodological habits that delimit the means with which children might engage in research to access and re-describe their agency (Hall, 2015; Wood, 2015). These habits “can be witnessed in the attitudes of some adults” favouring what is often perceived as “‘ideal participation’ based on the mainstream participation agenda” (Martin and Franklin, 2010: 101-102), influencing decisions on *who* is likely to participate (and as needed), according to pre-structured motives, measures and ideologies (Gramsci, 1992). Throughout the thesis I have unpacked these considerations to make a critical and lucid appraisal of quality in the methods traditionally used in research with children, confronting deep-rooted societal hierarchies that permeate research epistemology and methodology, thus highlighting links between recruitment trends, outcomes, and the propagation of a rhetorical discourse that works to distinguish some children from others. Research that produces divisive discursive constructions of children and childhood and the resulting research paradigms are complex to unravel, and adult-centric methods hard to dispel. My study attempts to show that within the field of childhood studies researchers are prolific and proactive in attending to “interactions between personal agency and political structures” in children’s experiences, illustrated by children (Alderson, 2017: 205). However, there continues to be “little reference to disabled children’s place within this” (Martin and Franklin, 2010: 97).

Some research with children with dis/abilities demonstrates that approaches to include children’s sociological interpretations and views are only tentative, and this is due to procedural inequalities, determined by adults who can assume children’s lack

of interest and competence in taking part (Wyness and Buchanan, 2004; Martin and Franklin, 2010; Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam, 2014; Thomas, 2017). In Chapter 3, I mapped children's roles in mainstream research through the lens of childhood sociology; to understand the ways children formulate private and social identities and peer cultures (Goffman, 1990; Thomas, 2017; Corsaro, 2018). Subsequently, methodological, ethical and practical ideas grew from a focus on capability and choice, autonomous and experiential "human flourishing" (Alderson, 2017: 204; Montessori, 2012/1949; Terzi, 2013). In other words, I have argued that it is possible to reduce the adverse distinction between rhetoric and practice, enacting a "utopian" vision of research that respects children and their creative agency (Alderson, 2017: 230). Exploring and unpacking the advances in mainstream participatory research with children and on childhood, and art in research, were essential steps in creating a framework that sees equal rights for all children as the basis of autonomous and spontaneous participation in social encounters (including research and education). In so doing, the study encourages adults to "examine assumptions about children, increase recognition of diversity and attune to children's own perspective" (Davis and Hill, 2006: 256).

This research is together an ethical project and a cultural and civic one. It offers reflexive evaluations of current methodological and educational practices, to challenge the perceived effectiveness and the *quasi*-economic function of directive methods used in research with children. This study draws attention to similar conditions and assumptions that characterise the ideological undercurrent of educational practices and schooling. It constructs an alternative model of interactivity between children and adults in which power, status and generational

imbalances are troubled and minimised (Christensen and Prout, 2002; Mayall, 2008; O’Kane, 2008; Veale, 2009), using non-directive and responsive research methods designed with children (see Chapters 4 and 5 for a full discussion on methods and the creative environment). The study engages critical evaluations of the activation of the participatory rights of *all* children in research, creating an alternative space to recognise, respect and explore children’s lived realities with children. This research reviews the use of directive tools and conditions that dominate children’s agentic status in different fields, to examine the language and attitudes that expose the uncritical marginal positioning of children disabled by a diagnosis or label (an in-depth discussion on children and adults’ perceptions can be found in Chapters 6 and 7).

This thesis makes an original contribution to the literature on arts-based methods, aesthetics, socially just research and the study of childhood, by deconstructing disciplinary boundaries that accentuate historical and persistent distinctions that serve to reproduce methodological inequalities through symbolic and linguistic devices. It does this by asserting children’s capability *a priori*, without succumbing to the dichotomies of ableist rhetoric. The methodological design, informed by an appreciation of critical pedagogy and arts practice, contributes to reinvigorating the debate on the ethics of researching with children, enabling access to meaningful resources, creativity and agency, without stifling children’s cultural capital, autonomy and self-presentation (in children’s own terms). This philosophy contributes to the study of childhood by questioning the use of directive practices, in research with children, which derive from societal common sense and educational habit (Gramsci, 1992).

The thesis revives the value of artistic expression, often confined to (auto-ethnographic) artist/adult research, entrenched in practice-led enquiry. It extends previous efforts to expand accessibility and skills in research with children, by investing in a visual and aesthetic language that can excite, empower and engage, “but also shape, human perceptions and experiences” (Moon, 2002: 140), activating personal and relational understanding in concrete form (McNiff, 2011; Bernardi, 2019a).

8.1 Methodological perspectives

The data show that children can engage in acts of meaning (Bruner, 1990) that convey “conscious and unconscious themes” and questions, and constructions of the world in aesthetic form (Engel, 2009: 214). ‘Research with children’ in this thesis is taken to mean respecting, listening, seeing and analysing the products of spontaneous and dialogic interactions with children advancing views that have sociological value and civic purpose. This type of research has required permeating disciplinary boundaries with the political and agentic potential of arts practice and aesthetics. The analysis, in turn, has demonstrated that for all social actors meaning and positionality are structured (Bourdieu, 1991) and interpretations bounded by conditioning beliefs that are reinforced through ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1992). These beliefs assume hegemonic functions that evolve over time into linguistic devices that re-create and mask deep-rooted historical conditionings, sifting children into normative and counter-normative identity types consolidating social divisions. This study re-images and extends the range of visual methods for researching with children, which have often been reductive and directive in their form and use (Gallacher and Gallagher,

2008). I argue that artistic methods offer powerful research opportunities that are “participative”, non-directive and generative (Veale, 2009: 255). Communication, accessibility and ethics in research can be deepened and broadened merging the tools of self-directed and critical education (Montessori, 2004; Veale, 2009; Freire, 2018) with the symbolic and malleable processes of artistic practice and aesthetic meaning-making (Barone, 2008; Barone and Eisner, 2012; Belluigi, 2018). A culture of artistic and aesthetic sensibility has surrounded and enriched the research interactions. The analysis of multimodal and multifaceted interpretations, encompassing embodiment, silences and metaphors, challenges “the position of children in the social and cultural sciences”, interrupting the “ceaseless paradox” of children’s problematic access to personal resources and values in research centred on exploring their views (Christensen and Prout, 2009: 43). This research questions the impact of long-standing ideas and ideals presupposing that common sense and linguistic choices are invested in the apparent virtues of a common (public) good.

The sites of this research, nine mainstream primary schools in two countries, are examples of fields in which different social actors exercise subordination and consent according to an implicit (or explicit) ‘common good’ discourse (Gramsci, 1992). These sites are all, equally, implicated in a process of global and ‘universalising’ practices that serve to create distinctions between childhoods, which are eventually englobed in children’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). These distinctions, which undermine the idea of children as capable social actors, have become apparent in different ways coalescing around two key themes: expressive capital and autonomy. Firstly, in the quality, availability and access to material and symbolic resources (capital), offered according to perceived ability and interests, through which children

are confined, sifted, sorted and streamed (Bourdieu, 2010; Abrahams, 2016). Secondly, in the differential levels of children's autonomy, agentic expression and participation in research, defined by the colonial direction of segregated educational discourses and practices that are conditional to the (inconsistent) 'plasticity' in adults' willingness to question common sense ideals of order and productivity (Gramsci, 1947; Bourdieu, 1991; Leggett, 2013; Freire, 2018). Each of these distinctions surfaced through a thematic analysis of normalcy and ableist discourse (Goodley, 2017; Slater and Chapman, 2018).

So, why are such distinctions enacted, accepted, and often left unquestioned?

By battling with this question, this thesis offers discursive and aesthetic leads to foreground and analyse practices through which children are dis/placed by labels that rationalise and legitimise the human categorisation of individuals that share a common diagnosis. The research process aimed to dispel uncritical divisions that subordinate children (Young-Bruehl, 2012), which can be more explicit in the case of children positioned by a diagnosis determining unequal access to civic agency and participatory opportunities (Onnis, 2013; Goodley et al., 2016; Thomas, 2017).

8.2 Reclaiming human agency

This thesis has sought to take an original and critical approach to dealing with deep rhetorical distinctions that function through formulaic differences in social practices, embedded in education and research, to lift disciplinary boundaries and engage authenticity, spontaneity and improvisation in a dialogic interpretation of children's social realities. The methods designed with, and used by, children encompassed

artistic authority and autonomy, to interact with and enact lived experiences, situationality, agency and identity in visual and tactile form.

The aesthetic outcomes produced in this context assume political value. They engage new questions on stereotypical assumptions tied to dis/abling discourses around interpretation, self-presentation and ability. The liberal and concrete forms of engagement have brought new light to the products of experience that signal children's views, values and aspirations. This approach to children's capability and autonomy, in experiential and artistic interactions and processes, exposed the construction of partial and adverse participatory conditions in other *fora*. I argue that structured practices, visible in research and education, can withhold children's agentic capabilities as well as their independent authorship.

The formulation of personal agency in this research interacted with the emergence of contradicting constructions of ability and dis/ability in private and public fields (see Onnis, 2013, cited in Chapter 4); revealing the evolution of impersonal and irresponsible labels and policies that have limited appeal for the individuals positioned by such terms (Hodge, 2016; Gramsci, 2018; Runswick-Cole, Curran and Liddiard, 2018). The cross-cultural dimension of this project has enriched the estimation of common and situated experiences in children's views, within and across sites, through a shared aesthetic language, 'adding texture' to the value of listening in the research process.

8.3 Methods for dissemination

The socio-political perspective in the analysis and knowledge mobilisation has provoked an aesthetic dialogue with new and established audiences. The artistic

forms of interpretation, identity and experience formulate an invitation to disrupt canonical research engagement, with implications for education, ethics and politics (Barone, 2008).

Ethical research respects agency and individuals and is sustainable beyond the temporal boundaries of a study. Engagement thus continues beyond 'data collection'; it has propelled into a *network of creative activities* across participating schools, for teachers, school leaders and support staff. Parents participated in informal meetings to share the developments in their stories and aspirations, following their initial engagement in the field activities, extending reciprocity, collaborations and the terms and reach of dissemination.

All artistic outcomes from the creative encounters with children (which were gradually gathered and stored securely at the end of each activity) were returned (in person) to children and families. I invited children and parents to keep the artefacts as a tangible record of their involvement in the research. Children have ownership of the photographs taken throughout the study, which recorded their artistic productions, creative development and agentic journey. Children have received individual books containing a selection of twenty images and a full record of their images in electronic form (in individualised USB files). In consultation with children, parents and school staff, it is possible that artefacts and photographs could be collected and presented in local and international exhibitions to celebrate children's identities, contesting dominant traditions of 'literal' dissemination, to re-image authenticity, capability, agency and visibility (in and through research).

Art can attract multiple reactions and encourage a more radical, ethical and affective approach to non-literal forms of validation and dissemination. This type of research

can induce diversity of audiences and responses, producing new literacies and points of entry that may not be accessible in a traditional academic conversation.

A range of multimodal records of participation (i.e. photographs, transcripts, creative activities *in situ*) have also been an integral catalyst for ‘non-textual’ dissemination, which has included post-research focus groups with school practitioners and papers presented at international conferences with a range of methodological, civic and political *foci*. These have resulted in further specialist outputs (Bernardi, 2019a, 2019b).

8.4 Reviewing (the impact of) the research process

The initial overarching aim of this research was to understand how children with a diagnosis of autism live and convey their identity, to investigate how interpretations of the ‘self’ are potentially shaped by ableist discourses within a specific national culture.

The study involved the everyday happenings of individual children, parents and school practitioners, their viewpoints and personal priorities. The engagement of adults, critical actors within children’s diverse social spaces, supplemented the investigation of discursive practices enacted in different fields. The cross-cultural stance added to the scope of representing children’s personhood in its fullest dimension.

The value of children’s input through attentive observation and dialogue in establishing a reflexive research methodology has the potential of producing a transferable research approach that can be employed to elicit the expertise of other populations, by merging critical pedagogy, arts-based methods and aesthetics.

Artistic methods offer a range of opportunities to experience and communicate personal realities different to those that might emerge in verbal expressions and interactions alone, while potentially manifesting unexpected interpretations of capability and agency (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). Importantly, visual and creative practices provide alternative, potentially more engaging, tools for children to communicate and identify personal views without relying solely on verbal ability and skills, and adult direction. Visible and concrete outcomes also provide a means of preserving particular subjectivities and personal meanings, sheltered within the actions and purposeful signs of experience that are made accessible to the observer only in part. Communication through spontaneous activity supports the integration of both conscious and subconscious feelings and beliefs, beyond the use of words (Kramer, 1973; Bates, 2008).

In addition, the study offers an opportunity to implement ethical practices that can provide different ways to explore and engage with multimodal data from a critical methodological perspective, to tease-out discursive habits that can lead to the persistent misrepresentation of children, in education and research. Planning the research activities in cooperation with participants enabled the formulation of the analysis according to a reflexive and ethical stance within the liberal and evolving research interactions, and an egalitarian approach to knowledge production. This stance is essential in an ongoing evaluation of how children can and should be engaged in the methodological and sociological intent of a study.

The research environment and relational interactivity produced with participants are an intrinsic part of the research outcomes “which are generally not available to social researchers through more conventional forms of data” and expression (Emmison et

al., 2012: 5). This thesis has illustrated the value and practicalities implicated in a dialogic methodology, these have been essential in my appraisal of reflexivity and researcher privilege, and the persistent marginalisation resulting from common sense disempowerment (Gramsci, 1947; Bourdieu, 2005a). The multimodal methods have been critical in questioning homogenisation and polarising dispositions in the ways children are ‘imagined’ as agents in research and civic interactions. The artistic products and processes available in this study expand our redundant view that aesthetics, culturally charged actions and values are the result of adult experience.

8.5 Future possibilities

The methodology and my positioning within the writing process have been the subject of a substantial shift. From the ethnographic stance informed by my geo-cultural positioning in two countries, to a theoretical perspective that merges critical thematic analysis with my own experience of the arts to examine “how actions are given meaning and how identities are produced in language use” (Hjelm, 2014: 134). My own evolving status is reflected vividly in the words of Descartes (1970/1637) “it seemed to me that the only profit I had had from my efforts to acquire knowledge was the progressive discovery of my own ignorance” (*ibid*, 1970: 9). I recognise that the ethnographic position of looking in “to find a truth”, that I had initially considered, would disrupt the everyday lives of children, families and professionals, and emphasise the limits of situality and the authorial power of research (Tsolidis, 2008: 271). Reviewing my position while respecting the intentions of educational ethnography, allowed me to revisit my own experience in the arts and art education (Bernardi, 2019a), to engage with theoretical positions that align more coherently

with a critical pedagogic stance, social justice and values-driven priorities. In so doing, I was able to explore the interactions between the construction of identity, common sense and everyday practices, in an attempt to integrate the language of critical discourse theory with rights-respecting methods and agency in education and research (Gramsci, 1947; Montessori, 2004; Alderson, 2012; Freire, 2018). My explorations questioned the limiting and dehumanising effects of dis/ability branding in research and other social fields (Shakespeare, 1996; Slee, 2004; Dudley-Marling and Burns, 2014; Ferri, 2015; Goodley et al., 2016; Hodge, 2016; Runswick-Cole et al., 2018).

The resulting research produced with children has the potential to provide “a framework for developing enlightenment” for “others in similar and related contexts who share some of the same concerns” (O’Donoghue, 2007: 64). I have used Gramsci (1947) and Bourdieu’s (1991) sociological theories to appreciate and untangle the interactions that influence and produce different versions of children’s identity, including societal and internalised interpretations of capability and agency (I have dedicated the final part of this chapter to this discussion). I have come to realise that there is a substantial disciplinary overlap between creative and sociological methodologies. This can encourage the development of non-hierarchical partnerships, to explore self-representation, in fields where subjectivity and political ideology converge. My practical experience in the arts has been central in informing and producing tangible expressive opportunities and trust, seeking to elicit children’s views in autonomous, meaningful and visible ways (StThomas and Johnson, 2007; Huss, 2013, 2016; Wallace, 2015; Bird, 2017; Mannay et al., 2017). Children’s creative capabilities and aesthetic agency enabled self-presentation that emerged

spontaneously and was not the result of directional demands or questioning, to label and steer participation (Veale, 2009), diminishing the temptation to use reductive methods that would undermine and restrict children's civic activity.

Children's creative capital and first-hand interpretations were respected and validated, through subtle and meaningful attentiveness (Lee, 2000; Alerby, 2015; Jonsson and Svonni, 2015). Encouraging multiple, diverse and common perspectives in dialogue with children, and through a critical analysis of emergent themes, this research deals with the unexpected, reframing capability and agency and methodological rhetoric in and beyond research. By offering a 'space' for open, limitless and heterogeneous interpretations of social life (in the form of aesthetic and textual data), this research brings together social questions that interact with the present, interrogate the past and trouble persistent discourses that serve to legitimise rhetoric. In representing identities and perspectives, in complex and affective acts, the children involved in this study put forward 'cultural texts' that deserve our attention. These have the potential to bring different audiences into dialogue, disrupting persistent views and structures, to redress "discursive literacy" in research and education (MacLure, 2003: 8), calling for this type of exploration to be central in restoring children's stolen humanity.

8.6 "I feel a storm"⁵¹: the civic potential of engagement through research

My first approach to the thesis conclusion has entailed re-engaging with the theoretical work that has led to the development of the analysis and an understanding of my civic role and positioning in the context of this research. In particular, the

⁵¹ A quote from Susie (7)

political thought of Gramsci, which arises from the letters and prison notebooks (1947, 1992, 2018), and the appreciation of the structured nature of society's interactions as exemplified in Bourdieu (1985, 1991, 2005a, 2010) have allowed a critical interpretation of the historical pull of common sense orientations towards difference. Examining Gramsci and Bourdieu's social theories in tandem has uncovered their distinct and complementary contributions to a range of disciplines, to illuminate the role of the 'State' represented by a trajectory of dominant discourses of privilege and ideology propelled through research, education and sites of elitist activity (Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 2005a). The ethos of their socio-political and linguistic projects is echoed in my analysis of the rhetorical perpetuation of distinctions between broad elites and marginalised minorities. Methodologically, this critical outlook has enabled more than the centralisation of children's perspectives. It has generated a clear focus to question the use of linguistic devices that prolong discursive practices drawn from the past, in spite of their apparently progressive (superficial) reinvention.



Figure 69. Susie: "I feel a storm". 09.09.2017

These reflections are at the basis of civic research, to explore and develop methodological and pedagogic approaches that pertain to a process of dialogue with the individuals and communities affected by hegemonic ideals. Using a Gramscian lexicon has enabled a deep and multifaceted evaluation of the economic and reductionist ideology perpetuated in educational discourse, its persistence and temporality through a linguistic re-branding of ableist rhetoric. A Gramscian analytical theory and praxis invites a series of questions and reflections that extend the work illustrated in this thesis.

As the central thread of the thesis demonstrates, there are necessary linguistic and methodological shifts needed at various junctures of a radical and civic research process. This way, research can become part of a dynamic process of political participation and action, and an invitation to produce interrogations that rise beyond the academic environment (Gramsci, 1992), to generate a process of conscience awakening. Reading Gramsci throughout this research process has extended my understanding of a theory of society that signals distortions that position individuals in insularity and generality at once. It is therefore necessary to proceed critically in the process of dissemination of subjective and collective viewpoints visible in research. The individual and collective interpretations emerging from the aesthetic and narratological accounts have underlined the complex relationships between children and families and the individuals that exercise hegemony as an extension of the State, in the positions they are assigned in public spheres (Gramsci, 2018). The analysis also shows a significant alignment with Gramsci's discussions on the overly bureaucratic interchanges between the subaltern classes and the State, and the

uncritical actions of those ‘intermediary’ figures embodying the authority of the state within the educational and medical establishment.

The issue of bureaucracy became prevalent throughout the interviews with parents, who articulated - consistently - the effect of a de-humanising protocol questioning explicitly “*the ability to parent*” (George, father) and “*the possession of any skill at all in our children’s make-up*” (Laura, mother). Authority was embodied through symbolic capital, legitimising anachronistic assessments and tests that “*sought to determine a problem or a cause*” (Carlo, father), both unambiguous expressions of a common notion of desirable identity/citizen ‘types’.

It is necessary to note that Gramsci’s political thinking is rarely used explicitly as a tool for analysis in the study of dis/abling discourse, and this is an unfortunate oversight. Moreover, only those scholars who have engaged with Gramsci’s biography, and the geo-political origins of his thought and his (deteriorating) physical condition (Shakespeare, 2014; Shakespeare, Watson and Alghaib, 2017), have positioned his work as a lived expression of intersectionality (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Carastathis, 2014; Nuti, 2019).

It is through an acknowledgement of his (and one’s own) biography, or *self-inventory* to use Gramsci’s term, that it is possible to better understand his relationship with civic intervention, philosophy and radical writings (Said, 1978), that transcend the purely political role of his work as it is most commonly deployed (Shakespeare, 2014). The biographic and geo-political character of Gramsci’s civic philosophy often emerges accidentally, in the analysis of historical, political and sociological divisions and primarily as a way of exploring the Marxist and neo-Marxist inferences in his interpretations of the human condition. It is important therefore to seek to use

Gramsci's work by engaging explicitly with his philosophical and political activity as it develops and is situated within a physical and biographic (and geo-political) struggle, which strongly aligns his writings with the study of marginalisation as an embodied condition. From this viewpoint, the recognition of the convergence of Gramsci's own lived experience with his interpretation of factors of sociological weight enables a methodological appraisal of his thinking that is often (only) suggested, usually in favour of a purely political or partisan approach to his writings. I argue that it is critical to recognise the contribution of Gramsci's work and life (preceding, and entrenched in, his incarceration) in the analysis of educational and societal elitisms, governing and maintaining dichotomies of "leaders and followers, the governors and the governed" (Gramsci, 1975: 1752) such as the ones exemplified in this study. My emphasis is on the economic structuring of education and the contradictions that live at the intersection of human nature and public discourse. The central argument of this thesis has evolved into a critical reflection on the reductionist approach to children's identities and capabilities. In attending to this argument, using a Gramscian lens, it is possible to develop an alternative viewpoint to rethink children's agency and to question the designs of the instructional and economic status of educational discourse. The economic model privileges the citizen workers of the future (Gramsci, 1992; Lister, 2003; Williams, 2004, Penketh, 2016), thus, determining which 'childhoods' are worthy of an attentive pedagogic and material investment. This outlook does not seek to deny the improvements that have been formulated over time⁵², and have materialised in methodological commitments to children (see Alderson, 2008a, Terzi, 2013; Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley,

⁵² See for example, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989).

2017; Liddiard, Curran and Runswick-Cole, 2018), yet it offers a needed appraisal of historical injustices that persist and ‘breathe new life’ in the production and reproduction of contemporary divisive discourse. Through ‘common sense’ these discursive practices are maintained and strengthened (Gramsci, 1992; Crehan, 2016). Gramsci’s notion of common sense is consolidated, systematically, through consent, thus attributing legitimacy and authority to the views of individuals and institutional bodies (i.e. medical staff, policy makers, educators, schools, etc.) who classify and select childhoods/children according to an uncritical ‘common’ ideology.

As this thesis has shown, such an ideology moves beyond historical and geographical boundaries. It has implications on the availability of educational and symbolic (human, relational, attitudinal and material) resources (Terzi, 2007) and on the opportunities to dispel boundaries between elites and minority groups (e.g. adults and children, en/abled and dis/abled, teachers and parents, class teachers and support staff). The same ideology is intimately woven into the ways educators attempt to justify their inability to engage with personalities, cultural capital and skills that do not align with the artifice of a common norm.

“He doesn’t engage with spellings. He doesn’t engage at all with phonics, really”

F- Does he engage more in number tasks?

“No, not in any really”

“If you’re taking it in ‘animal’ you can tell he’s very knowledgeable about facts but we are very time-limited”

(Photo elicitation exchange, 13.10.2017)

This exchange exemplifies the differential notion of pedagogic duty, the advancement of an implied productivity discourse and the ‘fraying’ of the moral fibre of the educational establishment entrenched in practitioners’ habitus.

This study reveals that forms of distinction ingrained in school discourse are disguised in theoretical and concrete reasoning and in some cases (as the example above shows), while the possession of certain skills is recognised, the merits of children's own resources are set against a framework perceived as impenetrable and bound by political and instructional designs and 'reason'. For Gramsci the prevailing 'common sense' producing and reproducing these norms maintains linkages with the past through educational discourse and practice. Moreover, Gramsci encountered, first-hand, the "formidable obstacles posed by a state educational system that was designed to serve the rich and perpetuate their leading role in society" (Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo, 2002: 4). The ramifications of these historical premises in contemporary educational systems (in Western societies) are disguised in policies, language, ideology, and the perpetuation of societal distinctions that support an economic endeavour and a discourse of productivity, social 'stability' and 'sustainability' that reflects an apparent 'common good' (Lister, 2003; Williams, 2004; Penketh, 2016).

These societal, economic and class distinctions are represented in Gramsci and Bourdieu as structural impositions. These are produced and reproduced through, often uncontested, consent from minority groups (the subaltern classes), and are an expression of equivalent premises that emerge from the analysis of dis/ability discourse.

The historical premises of education, for example in Gramsci, and the explicit reference to an hegemonic function of the educational establishment are best known and understood through a permeation of society through cultural dominance, "philosophies, values, tastes, and so on" (Borg, Buttigieg and Mayo, 2002: 6;

Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 2010). However, it is also necessary to consider the mastery of the dominant ruling classes that have the hegemonic power to select and order those individuals and masses that conform to an uncritical activity of production and reproduction of concerted ideals in education (Abrahams, 2016).

Education is a systemic site for authenticating difference; it places under attack “groups disadvantaged by virtue of their race, age, gender, class, and lack of citizenship” (Giroux, 2002: 44). I would argue that the latter is the most critical symptom of the disenfranchisement of individuals, such as children dis/abled by a diagnosis. Children situated on the margins, represented by physical, symbolic and cultural confines posed and justified by societal common sense, are frequently denied the most elementary tools to express agency, personal resources and citizenship. This study has shown that, specifically, the positioning and commodification of difference is translated into practices that become persistent, remain unquestioned and are legitimised by inflating a type of Social Darwinism that justifies forms of exclusion and ableist rhetoric, while subtly (or explicitly) abdicating responsibility to the hands of those it oppresses (Giroux, 2002).

Dis/abling rhetoric results in inequitable civic participation, in education and beyond, limiting the quality of children’s experiences of engagement and obscuring their identity. Gramsci notes,

Finding the real identity underneath the apparent differentiation and contradiction and finding the substantial diversity underneath the apparent identity is the most essential quality of the critic of ideas and of the historian of social development.

(Gramsci, 2011: 128-129)

Gramsci (here) is aspiring to evoke the attention of those who are empowered to change the consignment of minorities, through dialogue. Gramsci illustrates class differentiation and subalternity, highlighting the role of education in normalising material as well as artificial distinctions and, equally, in holding the necessary privileged to produce change. In the case of the themes analysed in this thesis, the authoritative power that is situated in elitist, political, medical and dis/abling discourse is maintained on the precedent of permanent class distinctions, producing - often - durable, approximated and ill-informed accounts of ability and capability that are etched on children's identities. I have argued that education, like research, can reinforce the systemic divisions found in society and activated in schools. Gramsci (1992) reminds us of the critical role of the intellectual. One of civic commitment, self-reflection and engagement, which must go beyond resisting "both the repressive and integrative functions of hegemony" (McLaren et al., 2002: 174).

The intellectual/researcher/educator/artist can develop a civic commitment through research and a critical awareness towards the products of struggle, engagement and dialogue (Freire, 2018), "indispensable for achieving the conditions of liberation of which Gramsci spoke" (McLaren et al., 2002: 173). It is also important to maintain an awareness that,

The reproduction of unjust history is pervasive as it shapes the background conditions in which some present wrongs occur and relations between agents are established. At the same time, it is dynamic because it is enabled also through agents' actions and interactions. (Nutti, 2019: 4)

This dynamism can be the point of entry for researchers and educators. As argued by Filippini (2016) the 'organic intellectual' emergent from the working class, as defined

in Gramsci, has a radical role in countering and disrupting discourses propagated by traditional intellectuals, in education, the academe, in schools and other public spheres. This role suggests devoting more attention to intervening organically, reflexively, to review methods that remain unquestioned and routinely accepted when “the so-called traditional intellectuals” work “in reproducing the system” (Chun, 2018: 621). Research that is organic, not fully formed, generative and situated, can offer strategies to engage with intersectionality and interdisciplinarity in a socially just dialogue with different social agents and stakeholders.

Researchers can find occasions and methods to encourage a re-presentation of identity and civic agency, to embark in a critical methodological pathway to question and disrupt (dialogically) the perpetuation “of people’s hegemonic common-sense beliefs” (Chun, 2018: 621). This thesis, then, is a humble attempt to embark in such pathway, to facilitate participatory redescriptions of:

- *Identities.* Identities are formed and transformed through social participation, self-reflection and representation, in complex and dynamic ways. Children like all social actors have the right to be fully involved in representing their own versions of their identities through the exercise of agency and the respect and recognition from other social actors in different fields.
- *Art.* Artistic and aesthetic self-presentation can stimulate non-directive expression that is visual, tactile and embodied. It engages with new meanings, accessible literacies and, importantly, generates new questions that are both subjective and societal. Art can provide powerful mechanisms through which identities are explored and concealed, propagated and internalised. Art is politically charged, it can move across cultural and disciplinary borders. Involvement in creative work can be a step in the ‘dark’, a move into unforeseeable explorations of social struggles and representations that are not tied to textual definitions.

- *Research.* Researchers and educators have a modest but complex role in this task, to reposition expertise and agentic authority, to review researcher privilege as a standpoint from which social capital and commitment can generate visibility for populations on the margins. Research can have a critical role in propagating children's views in ways that unsettle the adult gaze and produce not one counter-narrative but new and multiple points of entry to engage in an egalitarian civic debate.

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Appendix 1

***LEAFLET IN
ITALIAN***

***LEAFLET IN
ENGLISH***

Appendix 2

Pictorial Assent Form in Italian

Francesca

1 1 1 1

casa scuola

Francesca fotografa

si no

Una versione uguale o simile a questa verrà creata in rispetto delle facoltà del bambino, per registrarvi il proprio assenso.

La lettera di assenso con simboli verrà accompagnata da relativi suoni e segni (da Francesca) a seconda della comunicazione scelta e preferita dal bambino.

I bambini potranno un segno sul SI o sul NO a seconda della loro intenzione di partecipare, o meno, alle attività di ricerca.

Note per gli adulti:

Le cornici **Verdi** indicano il tipo ed il numero delle attività (1, 1, 1, 1 = 4).

Le cornici **Blu** indicano la sede delle attività, ad esempio con un adulto verrà scelta casa o scuola. In certi casi se non è offerta una scelta, sarà presente un unico simbolo per la sede.

Le cornici **Gialle** indicano l'adulto presente durante l'attività e le attività svolte dall'adulto [es. Francesca fotografa i disegni durante l'attività].

Pictorial Assent Form in English

The form contains the following elements:

- Top Section (Yellow border):** A photo of a woman labeled "Francesca".
- Activity Section (Green border):** Three boxes, each containing an icon of a paintbrush and the word "art". Below these are four small boxes, each containing the number "1".
- Venue Section (Blue border):** Two boxes. The left one contains a house icon and the word "home". The right one contains a school icon and the word "school".
- Adult Role Section (Yellow border):** A photo of the same woman labeled "Francesca", an icon of a person taking a photo, and the word "photograph".
- Response Section (Black border):** Two boxes at the bottom. The left one contains a smiling face icon and the word "yes". The right one contains a red "X" icon and the word "no".

A custom made pictorial assent form, such as the example above, will be used to record children's assent, in respect of their choice.

The form will be accompanied by relevant vocalised or signed communication from the adult (Francesca) according to children's choice and communication preference.

Children will be invited to express their assent by putting a mark on YES or NO to indicate their choice and their intention to (or not to) participate in the research activities.

Notes for adults:

Green frames indicate the type of activity and the number of sessions (1, 1, 1, 1 = 4).

Blue frames indicate venue/activity environment, this choice may be performed with an adult. In some cases one 'venue symbol' will be present on the assent sheet if a choice is not applicable (i.e. only one venue is available).

Yellow frames indicate the adult present during the activity and the activity performed by that adult [i.e. Francesca will photograph the artefacts during the activity].